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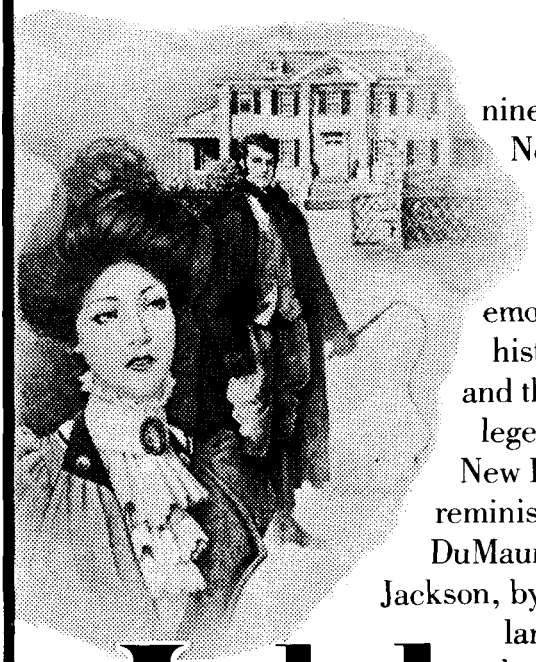

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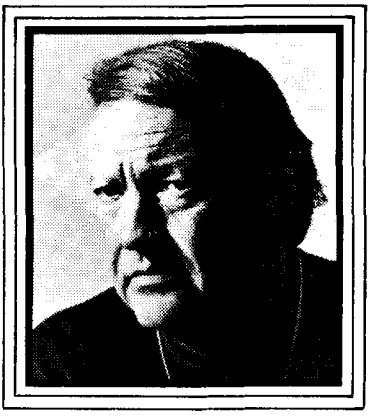

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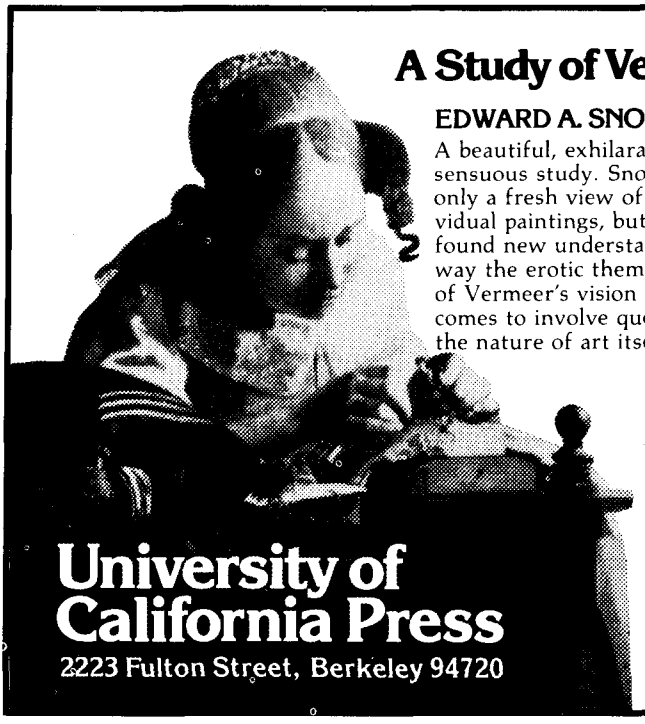

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John W. Aldridge

AN INTERVIEW WITH NORMAN MAILER

Much too early one morning last summer on Nantucket, a large and heavy box was delivered to our door. It contained the longest typescript I had ever seen, 1681 pages of *The Executioner's Song*, Norman Mailer's book about Gary Gilmore, the Utah murderer who sought and finally won the right to be executed by firing squad. I read the manuscript through in just three days, and when a short time later, I sat down with Mailer in New York to talk about it, I told him I had been held every step of the way but that there were certain points I hoped he would clarify. For example, why, out of the many executed murderers of our time, was he particularly attracted to Gary Gilmore? Because Gilmore wanted to die? Because he was interesting as a personality?

Norman Mailer: I have to go at this on two levels—the aesthetic and the cynical. We may as well start with the latter. I've had money troubles the last ten years—lately they've become so pressing that I can't really think of taking on any book unless I see some real possibility of earning at least as much money during the time I write as it will cost me to stay afloat. You just can't go along and be married as many times as I have, have as many children, live in a time of inflation, without discovering to your horror that even though you're going along by your own lights modestly, you're still spending a huge sum in a year, and therefore, you have to earn a huge amount. When you pay the IRS their sizeable tithe, it becomes a double enormous amount. You're always thinking about money. You know, when I was young, I used to meditate about literature, now I think about money. I never dare to consider a book any longer just because it appeals to me. I've forgotten what it's like to be drawn by a theme. I've become a commercial writer. I say it with woe, because there's no fun in being that. You start writing with the idea that you have a talent, maybe it's a large talent, or maybe if you work very hard at it, you will make it into a large talent, and then suddenly, you see yourself in the last third, probably, of your productive career,

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measuring everything by its economic potentialities. That is depressing.

John W. Aldridge: So you thought of Gilmore at least initially as a commercial property?

NM: Well, as I said, yes, I think of commercial possibilities. But, obviously, it's important not to take a book on just because it promises money. You can go down the tubes very quickly by that route. After all, it's bad enough that one's working as a *semi*-commercial writer. Once you're *wholly* commercial, once you take on a job merely because it'll pay the bills, and you have no interest in what you're doing, you're in terrible trouble. So if something appeals to you and also promises money, that gives it charisma. Gilmore, ergo, was a marvelously appealing character to me. By that, I don't mean he was someone I necessarily would have wanted to be close friends with . . . he appealed to me because he embodied many of the themes I've been living with all my life long before I even thought of doing a book on him. I knew just by what I read about him in the newspapers that I could write a 20,000-word essay on the man with no trouble, and have a lot to say. Before I wrote a thing about him I felt here's a perfect example of what I've been talking about all my life—we have profound choices to make in life, and one of them may be the deep and terrible choice most of us avoid between dying now and "saving one's soul"—or at the least, safeguarding one's soul—in order, conceivably, to be reincarnated. Maybe there is such a thing as living out a life too long, and having the soul expire before the body. And here's Gilmore with his profound belief in karma, wishing to die, declaring he wants to save his soul. I thought, here, finally, is the perfect character for me. So I was excited about the book.

JA: Did you feel you understood him thoroughly by the time you were finished with the writing?

NM: No, I felt I didn't understand him at all. I knew him by then better than I knew a lot of my relatives and friends, but I didn't understand him. It's analogous to the way you can be married to a woman for ten years and know her very well, know exactly what she's going to say, what she's going to do, what's going to make her happy, what's going to get her drunk, yet, fundamentally, you may not know whether she's good or evil. You don't perceive the source of her, if you will, of her *moral* inspiration. Does she worship the same gods you do, or are they alien? That's what you don't get near. So I was left at the end of the book with a sense of ambiguity about Gilmore

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that you can only feel about someone you know very well. I don't want to falsify the issue, or sentimentalize it. Gilmore was fond of saying that he was a very bad guy, and he was in a lot of ways. He had a lot of very bad, dull habits. He had a terrible temper, he was unspeakably selfish, and he had absolutely no desire to see other people's needs unless he chose to. He was terribly private, even secretive, and everything had to be done his way, or he wouldn't play. Yet, to be fair—I think it's fair—one could speak of Gilmore as having a quality that was almost saintly. He was certainly capable of rising far above the situation he was in and looking at it with the kind of extraordinary detachment very few people have. Since it involved his own death, I think he was doubly remarkable that way. I say saintly, but, of course, such powers are also Satanic. It's possible he was a very evil man. So by the end of the book we know him well, even intimately, but his moral personality beneath the man we know is considerably more saintly or malevolent than I can pretend to tell you.

JA: That suggests something else I wanted to get at. The narrative method that you've adopted here, as far as I know, is entirely new to you. It's one of extremely detached and impersonal documentation of every last detail that seems pertinent to the case. And you go on with this documentation to very great lengths because the manuscript runs to more than 1600 pages and it gives me the impression of being a sort of immense prose photograph. Now, I wonder, is this method meant to express the meaning that the Gilmore case came to have for you finally? In other words, does the huge quantity, the sheer mass of this material and your close documentation of it—are these somehow essential elements in creating the quality of the story that you had to tell?

NM: I'd say I made a literary decision to do the book this way. I was starting with a story about a man who, to a certain degree, is a talented artist, has been in jail all his adult life, comes out, meets a beautiful girl, and has a passionate love affair that almost works, then is very unsuccessful. They break up. It's so intolerable to him that a week later he murders two men on two successive nights. Once he's back in jail, he and the girl fall in love again. It is then he comes to the conclusion that it's hopeless to stay alive in such an incarcerated existence and so they must commit suicide together. Indeed they make a serious attempt to commit suicide, and failing, are separated forever except for their more or less profound belief in reincarnation which he finally takes with him to his death. Now I thought these

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elements of tragic love were so operative for the modern temper that they're almost unbelievable, unless you nail down every detail. Let's put it this way: it's as if there's a wind blowing so fierce and you're dealing with so large a tarpaulin, that unless you tack down every square foot of it, it's going to whip all over the place. Besides, I also felt that if I wrote it in my own style, the style that we're lately used to, no one would believe the book for a minute. They would say, "Oh, there's Mailer taking this very average, ordinary, dull punk killer and inflating him." They would have said I was working away on my bicycle pump. So, I thought, no, I'll stay out of the book entirely, I won't use anything that doesn't come from interviews or documents.

JA: Of course, if you had been much more Maileresque, you would have ended up writing a different kind of book.

NM: Maileresque is your word, not mine.

JA: OK, it's my word, but you don't show in this book any of the characteristics associated with your past writing. Because the style is a great departure from what you normally write—it's very simple, unadorned, unmetaphorical. Also you never once make use of one of your favorite dramatic devices, and that is to extrapolate from the experience being described to some kind of large generalizing statement about the implications of the experience. For example, in *The Armies of the Night,* you start out, at one point, with a physical description of the marshals who try to keep order during the Pentagon march, and you go from that to a meditation on the small towns of middle America—the barely controlled fury, the pent-up rage of the people who come out of that experience—the small town. And that leads you to very large questions of mystery, dread, finally Christianity in opposition to technology—it's all a marvelous and complex network of associations and references. Now this you scrupulously avoid in this book. You don't allow yourself any of these flights at all. Is that because you thought that the story of Gilmore in itself, narrated at great length, without any speculation or editorializing, would convey its own message, that it is itself a sort of metaphorical, or if you like, a metaphysical generalization about the nature of evil?

NM: No, I felt something else. The more I worked, the more I began to feel I didn't have the right to generalize on the material. In the past, of course, I always have. I usually had more in me to say than proper material with which to express it, so that it was natural to overflow into essays. But, at this point in my life, I thought, well, the people

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who have chosen to listen to what I've said have registered it, I've sort of used up my audience, and I thought, well, I want another audience. I want those people who think I'm difficult to read. And I must confess, there was also something else. I think we can name twenty American writers who each believe secretly and not so secretly that he or she is the best American writer living. I'll confess I'm one of those twenty. And I also know I can write in a number of styles—that is one of my talents, at least. All proportions kept—I don't pretend I'm one-hundredth as important in the cultural scheme of things—but I wish a few critics could see that I may feel a legitimate kinship to Picasso's need to keep changing his style. Preserving one's artistic identity is not nearly so important to me as finding a new attack on the elusive nature of reality. Primarily, one's style is only a tool to use on a dig. Of course, with such an attitude, you have to be able to mimic other writers. I've always been amused by people who say, "Oh, well, Norman Mailer can't write a simple sentence." I'm the guy who started by writing simple sentences. There's nothing easier than to come full circle and write a book with prose even simpler than *The Naked and the Dead.*

JA: I think it's the simplest prose you've ever written.

NM: There is real amusement in that, you know. I think of all those constipated, stingy writers who stick to a simple style all their lives and claim that's the only kind of prose worth doing. What nonsense. It's harder to write in a good baroque style than good simple English. For one thing, it takes a lot less time to write good and simple. That doesn't mean it's easy, and available to all, but it's not, you know, all that hard. Besides, the material called for such prose. The book has so much going on that its novelistic nature is rich without language. There just wasn't space to take an interesting character, and, make the room in which he is sitting equally interesting. In the past, I always liked long descriptions, but in this book there's just enough to keep the background from blurring out. A minimum of description is, of course, perfect for Utah. The variation from town to town is not great, and the variation from living room to living room is rarely striking. Even variations of income are not that dramatic. If people have a great deal of money, they usually don't show it in Utah. And if people are poor, they may live in a shack, or a sleazy two-story apartment building, but there's a beautiful mountain on the horizon. So I eschewed description where I could. I wanted to get 3000 pages of material into half the space. I wanted my story to *move.*

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JA: It's really crowded with material. That brings up another question: how did you get together this great volume of information? I mean, were you on the scene during the whole of the last days, the last weeks before Gilmore's execution?

NM: No. In fact, I read about it in the papers, like everyone else, and was equally fascinated. I felt I might just understand what Gilmore was doing. But I didn't think about it anymore than that. Then after, oh, a month after the execution, Larry Schiller called me. Now, Schiller and I worked together on my book *Marilyn,* closely at one point, and very badly at another. There was a period when we didn't even speak for six months. After that, we did a short book on graffiti together. As with *Marilyn,* he got the photographs and I wrote the text for it. Our relations became friendly again. Now he called me to read an interview with Gilmore that he and Barry Farrell had done for *Playboy.* I thought it was the best interview I'd ever read. So I got the idea it would be nice to direct a play out of that dialogue. Schiller said, "You can, but first you have to write the book." I was going well on my Egyptian novel at that point, and didn't really want to give it up. He sent me more material and then Warner Paperbacks offered a good sum, and I thought: "I can do this book in six months. It will give me more time to work on the novel." Of course, once again, six months took two years. Make such an error in estimate on two books, as I have, and you are seriously in debt. But to do the job in six months would have slaughtered all the possibilities of doing something exceptional. Schiller had been doing a lot of interviews before I came in, and I spent the first six months wandering around in bewilderment trying to put people and events together. I really had to work it out. Try encountering a hundred names at once. It's like looking at the laid-out pieces of a clock.

JA: So you essentially drew on the material that Schiller had already gathered. He had first rights, didn't he, to all the stories of almost all the principals?

NM: He had acquired rights to the principals. Also, he had done about sixty interviews before I came aboard. After that, he did another forty or fifty. I probably did almost as many. A lot were follow-up. I had the advantage of reading the initial interview he'd done, and he's a very good interviewer. But I must have collected a hundred interviews on my own. Then my secretary, Judith McNally, proved to be a marvelous interviewer and she talked to a lot of people toward the end, a lot of lawyers—she has a fine legal mind for a layman—and much of the jurisprudence in the book comes from her research. I'm

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considerably in debt to her for that. Altogether there may have been as much as 12,000 pages of interviews. At the place where we stopped counting, there were 6000 pages of transcript and we more than doubled it after that. Schiller and I often went out together to interview, and we must have looked like two detectives on the fat side, not one but two Continental Cops, side by side. I remembered we interviewed a woman once, and after we left, were driving along and suddenly, Schiller, who has a passion for verification, started pounding the wheel and said, "She's lying, she's goddamn lying!" Part of figuring out what happened was living with these interviews long enough to compare them to other interviews until you felt you could decide what probably did occur in a given situation. Then, of course, there were also the transcripts of the trial, and press clippings, and a great many psychiatric reports by the various doctors involved. Oregon State Prison was also a huge help. The Warden, Hoyt Cupp, had a 200-page summary of Gilmore's prison record prepared. A lot of material was there that never even got directly into the book. A lot of marvelous prison stuff from Gilmore's years in prison that just didn't get in. There were people who knew him when he was an adolescent. We had long interviews with them. They didn't get in for two reasons: one, it would have been another 500 pages, and, also, I hated to break the unity of *The Executioner's Song*—those nine months from the time he left jail until he was executed.

JA: There were moments, I thought, when you were strongly tempted to make some kind of comment. For example, where you had this marvelous interview with the lady who turned out to be one of Nicole's neighbors. In the scene I'm thinking of, she is being interviewed while her small boy keeps coming in and bothering her about the peanut butter, and she's telling a story about one of her husbands who pulled a butcher knife and killed himself right in front of her. She's telling this horrendous story interrupted from moment to moment by yells at the kid . . . "Get the hell away from the peanut butter jar!" And it struck me that this was marvelous material for some sort of comment about the kind of world that Gilmore came out of—where the women could be so indifferent to violence and so concerned with the trivia of the peanut butter jar without at all seeing the incongruity.

NM: I was thinking about painting as I worked on this book. That particular interview was like a found object. You know, it was lifted almost verbatim from the original transcript.

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JA: It's one of the few times you do that.

NM: It's the only time in the book where I literally do that, where I just take an interview and put it in the book. It was a found object. You know, a painter may find something on the street that he thinks is incredible. Sometimes he'll glue it right into the painting. It becomes part of the work. In *The Executioner's Song,* newspaper stories became part of the painting and part of the transcript of the trial—a lot of found objects. I felt acted upon, in a funny way, while doing this book, by painting terms. It was as if I'd shifted from being an expressionist, not an abstract expressionist, but an expressionist—like Munch, or Max Beckmann . . . those kinds of painters who worked with large exaggeration and murkiness and passionate power—into now being a photographic realist, even a photographic realist with found objects. The reason, I think, is that a painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes the aesthetic act. Because what he's seeing is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it's elusive.

JA: So you simply presented it.

NM: Sometimes you just have to. This, I think, is the place painting has gotten to . . . paint this realistic scene as it is, because in the act of presenting it, you will underline the mystery. That's why you show it with no decoration and no interpretation—for just that reason. The aesthetic imperative, if there was one, finally came down to: let this book be lifelike. Let it be more like American life than anything that's been done in a long, long time. I don't think good writers often have this kind of opportunity. Usually, material this good gets chewed over by journalists and bad writers. There are probably a few exceptions, but I can only think of *In Cold Blood.*

JA: I wanted to ask you about that because a comparison is bound to be made.

NM: Well, I think Truman's book and mine are formally similar, but vastly different. Obviously, I'll be the first to state that if he hadn't done *In Cold Blood,* it's possible that I wouldn't have thought of doing *The Executioner's Song* this way. It's perfectly possible. It's also perfectly possible that there's something about *The Executioner's Song* that called for doing it this way. I might have gone the same route in any case. Besides, its total flavor is considerably different from *In Cold Blood.* Truman retained his style for *In Cold Blood,* not the pure style—he simplified it—but it still was very

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much a book written by Truman Capote. You felt it every step of the way.

JA: It also novelizes much more.

NM: Yeah, he novelizes more, where I was determined to keep to the factual narrative. I wanted my book to read like a novel, and it does, but I didn't want ever to sacrifice what literally happened in a scene for what I would have liked to see happen. Of course, I could afford to feel that way. I had advantages Truman didn't. His killers were not the most interesting guys in the world, so it took Truman's exquisite skills to make his work a classic. I was in the more promising position of dealing with a man who was quintessentially American and yet worthy of Dostoevsky. If this were not enough, he was also in love with a girl who—I'll go so far as to say—is a bona fide American heroine. I didn't want, therefore, to novelize a bit. Dedicated accuracy is not usually the first claim you wish to make for books like this, but here it became a matter of literary self-preservation. I wanted people to believe me. What I had was gold, if I had enough sense not to gild it.

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Christopher Lasch

MODERNISM, POLITICS, AND PHILIP RAHV

Philip Rahv once wrote that American Transcendentalism "declared itself most clearly and dramatically in the form of the essay—a form in which one can preach without practicing." Rahv's own writings—a selection of which has now been published in a new edition—show the essay form in a more attractive light: argumentative, embattled, partisan in the best sense. Rahv never wrote anything the consequences of which he refused to accept. As a lifelong critic of the academic mind, which disguises timidity as objectivity, Rahv understood that literature and literary criticism, even when deliberately designed to give no offense, have political repercussions; instead of trying to deny this, he welcomed it as a condition of his craft. Having no use for purely formalistic styles of criticism, he insisted that literature attempts to describe and criticize the real world—not simply to express the author's inner state of mind or to satisfy a set of formal requirements—and that it must be judged accordingly. Refusing to distinguish between poetic truth and some other kind of "objective," scientific truth, Rahv held literature to the same standards applicable to any other mode of understanding historical reality. Thus he believed that American literature remained limited and stunted precisely because so much of it confined itself to personal experience, rarely penetrating the larger world of history, politics, and collective experience—the "constructive labor of curbing the chaotic forces in man and nature alike."

His grasp of the interplay between politics and culture made Rahv equally scornful of the "New Criticism" and of Socialist Realism and other left-wing formulas. The New Criticism trivialized literature, in Rahv's view, by making a fetish of the text and ignoring the historical context in which art originates. The communist literary critics of the 1930s, on the other hand, treated art as a direct product of class interest, crudely ideological in its content and purpose. Their call for a proletarian culture amounted in practice—such was Rahv's retrospective judgment—to a demand that writers subordinate their own point of view to that of the Communist party.

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Rahv's best work came as a product of his rejection of proletcult. He and other editors of *Partisan Review* earned from American intellectuals a lasting debt of gratitude by exposing the totalitarian character of Soviet communism; attacking the sentimental nationalism associated with the culture of the Popular Front; analyzing the American literary tradition with a rare combination of sympathy and detachment, neither ignoring nor exaggerating its accomplishments; and, not least, helping to introduce American readers to the classics of European modernism. No other critic wrote more perceptively than Rahv about the "cult of experience" in American literary thought or understood so clearly—and so far ahead of his time—the ideology of personal liberation it encouraged. His essay, "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," published in 1940 at the height of his own season of reappraisal, remains one of the most suggestive studies of our literature ever written. Noting how slowly nineteenth-century writers threw off the influence of Puritanism, Rahv argued that the American novel—as distinguished from the "romances" of Melville and Hawthorne—could emerge only when the triumph of secularism had brought about a more "positive approach to experience." The difficulties of establishing such an approach, however, left American literature in a state of arrested development, fixated on the "little world" of personal experience. Even the ostensibly political fiction of the 1930s perpetuated the "experimental mode," treating the class war merely as a "new and exciting" personal experience. The "ambition of the literary left to create a political art was thwarted by its failure to lift experience to the level of history."

These remarks apply with equal force, it is now clear, to the failure of the Left in the 1960s, when the radical impulse once again deteriorated into a suit of personal liberation, sexual freedom, and cultural primitivism. In this period Rahv once again found it necessary to dissociate himself from leftist fashions, without qualifying his underlying commitment to socialism. He remained unimpressed by the cult of pornography, the vogue of black humor, and by the "outrageous puffery" surrounding such allegedly subversive authors as Norman Mailer. Mailer's *American Dream*, with its "yea-saying to instinct," in Rahv's view exemplified the celebration of experience combined with a continuing attempt, characteristic of American writers, to "evade its multiple consequences." Far from "protesting against a genteel, conventional, and conformist activity," Mailer and lesser "swingers," in Rahv's opinion, merely hoped "to make the scene, to be 'in,' to be 'with it.' . . . What they are doing is expressing the fickle moods of a certain

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sector of American society, by no means the least affluent, which in every sphere but the political has collapsed into total permissiveness."

As editor of *Modern Occasions*, which he founded after leaving *PR* in the mid-sixties, as well as in frequent contributions to *The New York Review*, Rahv continued to defend critical modernism against both traditionalists and swingers. He wrote approvingly of the New Left while criticizing its indifference to history and its lack of strategic sense. He pushed his study of Dostoevsky almost to completion. Even though *Modern Occasions* suspended publication after six issues, Rahv's own powers showed no sign of diminution, and his death in 1973 deprived American culture of a critic whose independence from fashion is increasingly rare in a society that has assimilated culture so completely to the requirements of commodity production.

The new collection of Rahv's work, edited by Arabel J. Porter, his editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Andrew J. Dvosin, author of a New York University dissertation on Rahv, gives an idea of the range of his interests but makes it difficult to follow the development of his career—presumably the principal reason for bringing out such a volume at this time. Instead of arranging the essays in chronological order, the editors have grouped them rather arbitrarily into literary and political categories, an arrangement that violates the spirit of Rahv's work. Running heads at the top of right-hand pages refer only to the editorial categories into which the collection is divided, not to the titles of the essays themselves, and the date of their composition can be found only by thumbing to the back of each essay. The political section leaves many phases of Rahv's career unrepresented. His editorials in support of World War II, which caused Dwight Macdonald to leave *Partisan* and found *Politics*; his support of American foreign policy during the early years of the Cold War; his criticism of McCarthyism and of left-wing intellectuals who defended McCarthy; his controversy with Irving Howe over the New Left—these writings make no appearance here. Their omission leaves the impression that Rahv was mainly a literary critic who now and then wrote on political subjects; they make it hard to understand why Rahv believed that a defense of "high culture" was not only compatible with political radicalism but essential to it. In an essay on "The 'Partisan' Intellectuals," inspired by the publication of this collection (*The New York Review*, 23 November 1978), Frederick Crews airily writes that "no one" connected with *Partisan Review* "could explain how neo-Marxist political commentary was to be reconciled with 'The Dry Salvages' and highbrow discussions of the modern masters." But this is precisely what Rahv and his colleagues

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did try to explain, over and over again. For example, Rahv and William Phillips argued in 1937 ("Some Aspects of Literary Criticism," *Science and History*) that a criticism "unconscious of its own history"—a history deeply colored at every point by the work of the modern masters—condemned itself to swing from one politico-critical fashion to another, endlessly oscillating between a modish alienation and equally modish and shallow commitments to political activism. Because Rahv identified modernism so closely with historical as opposed to merely analytical thinking, he found in writers like Dostoevsky, Kafka, Joyce, and Eliot the most highly developed awareness of the historical situation of modern man. Marx's analysis of modern alienation, he thought, received unwitting support and confirmation from such writers. Thus Dostoevsky's later novels, conceived at least in part as a refutation of the utopian illusions to which Dostoevsky himself had subscribed as a young man, unintentionally dramatized the dissolution of older social forms, the demoralization of the Russian ruling class, and the bankruptcy of its ideas and institutions. A novel like *The Possessed*, "counterrevolutionary . . . in its manifest intention and content . . . actually depicts in terms of felt experience . . . the total disintegration of the traditional order and the inevitability of its downfall." Eliot's poetry, traditionalist in its overt ideological content, invited the same interpretation. In distinguishing between the manifest and latent meanings of the modern classics, Rahv followed D.H. Lawrence's injunction to "trust the tale rather than the artist"—an eminently sound, indeed a generally accepted principle of literary criticism.

Rahv valued the modernist tradition not only for its depiction of social disintegration, religious collapse, and personal alienation, but as a defense against parochialism and literary nationalism. It is no accident that his interest in modernism took shape in the period of the Popular Front, when American Stalinism allied itself with a nostalgic celebration of the American past, the flattery of the folk, and a quasi-official culture of populistic nationalism. In Rahv's eyes, the culture of the Popular Front invoked progressive symbols and rhetoric on behalf of a politics of accommodation—a combination that came to flower, it might be added, when the Communist party during World War II joined the Roosevelt administration in urging labor to call off its struggle for better working conditions and in exhorting workers, in the interest of revolutionary solidarity with the Soviet Union, to become "soldiers of production." Frederick Crews's inability to grasp the connection between Rahv's Marxism and his "highbrow" defense of

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literary modernism testifies to his own obtuseness, but it also reflects the failure of Rahv's editors to include material that would illustrate the cultural and political developments that *PR* attempted to combat: the simplifications of proletcult and of the Popular Front that followed in short order; the literary celebration of Americanism; the accommodation, both cultural and political, between the CP and American capitalism; and the ideology of folkish progressivism that disguised this accommodation and legitimized not only Stalinism but the American warfare state as the latest expressions of the democratic spirit.

In deriding Rahv's attempt to "reconcile" socialism and modernism, Crews may intend to suggest that literary modernism itself has now congealed into clichés. But he could have made this point without simultaneously arguing that the "seeming paradox of combining more or less left-wing socio-political commentary with lofty discourse" can be understood only by seeing both as expressions of the intellectual's pathological hatred of the middle class. The ideological drift of Crews's essay becomes unmistakable when he argues, in further criticism of Rahv, that we owe our civil liberties to "liberal capitalism"; that these liberties can never flourish in a "state founded on the victory of one former underclass" (a curious description of the Soviet Union or any other socialist society today, none of which have been distinguished by over-representation of the "underclass"); and that we should "thank the class enemy" for such freedoms as we enjoy—as if those freedoms had been conferred by a benign capitalist class instead of largely wrested from them against their will. The solicitude of capitalists for civil liberties does not leap out of an attentive reading of their history.

Crews's one concession to history, as opposed to sophisticated folklore, is the reminder that in the thirties, Rahv and his colleagues at *Partisan* "were sufficiently close to their leftist past for their devotion to literature to *be seen* as a courageous break with the party line." Even here, he cannot resist the sneer contained in the words I have italicized. It took not only courage but an enormous expenditure of intellectual energy to break with Stalinism at a time when Stalinism could plausibly claim to represent the last hope of checking fascism and when Stalinism had managed to associate itself, moreover, not only with resistance to Hitler but with the recovery of America's cultural heritage and democratic traditions. The pity of Rahv's career is that his double rejection of both Stalinism and American literary chauvinism left him with little intellectual energy for anything else. His thought

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remained fixed at the point he had reached at the end of the thirties. He continued to write brilliantly about modern literature and the literary scene, but he never undertook the re-examination of his political commitments—or of his literary commitments, for that matter—that would have taken him beyond anti-Stalinism to a more consistently antiauthoritarian position. After his break with Stalinism, he showed no further inclination to reconsider previously held opinions. Neither his "autopsy" on proletarian literature nor his "Twilight of the Thirties," both written in 1939 and ostensibly devoted to a reassessment of recent political experience, called into question the underlying assumptions of Leninism. In the first of these revealing pieces, Rahv criticized proletarian literature as "the literature of a party disguised as a class" but upheld the Leninist reasoning which justified the supremacy of the party on the grounds that the proletariat can never generate a revolutionary ideology of its own. Much of Rahv's analysis seemed to show that Leninism leads to Stalinism just as easily in literature as in politics; yet he condemned the cultural policies of the Communist party in the thirties not because the party had tried to set up a cultural and political dictatorship over the American working-class movement but merely because it had embraced the reactionary policies of the Popular Front. Proletarian literature "is withering away," Rahv complained, "because the party no longer needs it." The question of whether anyone else needed it was left hanging in the air.

The second of these essays grew directly out of the omissions of the first. Having failed to explain what was valuable in proletarian literature—on Rahv's own account a party "mystification" yet at the same time a promising "social impulse" allegedly "frustrated" by Stalinism—Rahv in his continuing search for "a new vanguard group" had to turn to the "modern artist," whose long-standing feud with the bourgeoisie he now tried to construe into the advance guard of a revolutionary culture. Rahv's commitment to modernism thus grew out of his unexamined commitment to Leninism. Both rested on the assumption that literary and political vanguards alone can lead the masses to the promised land.

Rahv's attempts to analyze the relationship between Leninism and Stalinism remained evasive and inconsistent. In a 1940 symposium not reprinted here, "What Is Living and What Is Dead in Marxism," he criticized Marxists for refusing to "re-examine the problem of leadership" and for clinging to "Lenin's theory of a 'vanguard' of professional revolutionaries." He himself conceded, however, only that Leninism was "not immune" to totalitarianism, or as he put it

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elsewhere, that "the Marxist teaching is not exempt from censure for the consequences of the Revolution." He continued to accuse Stalin, moreover, of having "betrayed the revolution," and further diluted his criticism of Lenin by insisting that Stalinism could not be "deduced" from the "classic texts of socialism." Had any serious critic even maintained that it could? Confronting anticommunist ideology in its crudest form, the "ideational fallacy" according to which Leninism led directly and automatically to Stalinism, Rahv argued, convincingly enough, that "ideas and movements have no reality except insofar as they derive it from living men." But the "living men" immediately preceding Stalin remained shadowy figures in Rahv's account of the "betrayal" of the revolution.

It would be difficult to quarrel with Rahv's somewhat abstract formulation that Stalinism grew out of a specific historical situation in which Leninism represented only one of several ingredients, including the "backwardness of Russia's economy and culture," the "failure of the revolution in the West and the consequently relentless pressure of world imperialism on the isolated Soviet state." But note what Rahv's account passed over in silence: Trotsky's suppression of the Kronstadt revolt, Lenin's enthusiastic adoption of Taylorism as a means of industrial labor discipline, his insistence on the primacy of the state over the worker, and the doctrine of "socialism in one country," which justified these dictatorial policies and tended, as Rosa Luxemburg observed, "to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon [Lenin and Trotsky] by the fatal circumstances" surrounding the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the failure of the revolution elsewhere.

In a 1953 essay on Whittaker Chambers, Rahv argued persuasively that Marxism, "Western in its main origins and holding a heavy charge of Judaeo-Christian ethics, has suffered a strange metamorphosis in its Muscovite captivity. And now, in its movement deeper into the East, it is seized upon, with all the fervor of native absolutism, by the backward, semimendicant intelligentsia of the Asian countries . . . unformed in the traditions of humanist and rationalist thought. . . . Its detachment from the West is virtually complete." But Rahv still stopped short of the conclusion that Lenin himself was in many ways the first of the Orientalizers of Marx. Lenin may have been a Westernizer in his initial commitment to Marxism, and to the belief that a "widespread and rapid European, and not Asiatic, development of capitalism" was the precondition of socialism in Russia, but he broke with Marxism in this growing emphasis on Russian exceptionalism

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and his doctrine that "for backward countries the road to democracy leads through the dictatorship of the proletariat"—in other words, the dictatorship of the Communist party. Lenin's defection in turn made it easier for "Asiatic" Marxism, in our time, to reinvade the West in the form of "Marxist-Leninism," as Maoism, Castroism, and various Third World cults gain adherents among radical students and intellectuals—themselves increasingly "backward" in their quasi-illiteracy, their contempt for democratic institutions, and the religious fervor with which they look to the East for deliverance.

Rahv's refusal to come to terms with the Leninist heritage in contemporary Marxism made it possible for him to participate in the anticommunist crusade of the late forties and fifties, to support American foreign policy in its containment fixation, and to revile "totalitarian liberals" like Henry Wallace without appearing to renounce his own revolutionary credentials. In his own eyes, he remained a revolutionary Leninist defending the revolution—or at least the idea of the revolution—against those who had "betrayed" it. In reality, his Leninism was now reduced to rehashing polemics against the Popular Front—a task that absorbed energies that might better have been devoted to a serious analysis of the postwar political scene. At the end of the war, Rahv rightly criticized followers of Trotsky for refusing to distinguish between democratic capitalism and Stalinist totalitarianism, reminding them that Trotsky himself had "declared that if the Second World War passed without bringing about a general socialist revolution then the whole Marxist scheme would have to be recast from the bottom up." Instead of addressing himself, however, to the intellectual problem of "recasting the Marxist scheme," Rahv conjured up a dark vision of Soviet expansionism (much at odds with Russia's military and economic weakness at the end of the war) that could only be read as an unconditional defense of the Cold War policies already taking shape under Truman. Rahv condemned the evils of "appeasement," moreover, without weighing the likelihood that such arguments would be used to justify the militarization of American society as the only force capable of putting down what he called the "rising tide of Soviet totalitarianism." Ignoring the dangers of a nuclear arms race; ignoring evidence that the "showdown" strategy had already failed to modify Soviet ambitions in any case; ignoring the self-defeating character of containment (pointed out by liberal critics like Walter Lippmann), Rahv continued to fight the cultural battles of the thirties without grasping their irrelevance to the postwar situation. Absorbed in his rhetorical offensive against "totali-

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tarian liberalism," he did not notice that American opinion had undergone a complete transformation—or more accurately, that an older enmity to the Soviet Union, partially submerged by the wartime alliance, had broken out again in a peculiarly virulent form. In the forties and fifties, it was no longer sentimental fellow-traveling but precisely a revulsion against the grand alliance, a militant and crusading anticommunism, that constituted the principal threat to American democracy from within.

Undertaking neither an analysis of postwar politics nor a theoretical reconsideration of Leninism, which still shaped his own reactions to events, Rahv in the Cold War period retreated to a singularly unprofitable style of argument, intensely parochial in its preoccupation with sectarian literary feuds, its indifference to large political trends in the United States, and its weakening grasp of the historical reality which the editors of *Partisan Review* had so often urged intellectuals to master. The collapse of the socialist movement in the United States (such as it was) had isolated left-wing intellectuals from any semblance of political responsibility. In Rahv's case, an increasingly uncritical attachment to "modernism"—to what William Phillips in 1940 called "the intellectuals' tradition"—reinforced this isolation and transformed every issue, every controversy about politics or culture, into factional disputation designed not so much to clarify issues as to identify one's ideological friends, castigate political enemies, and defend positions taken in the past.

After the "betrayal" of the Russian revolution, Rahv transferred his hopes for the future to the modernist avant-garde, condemned as "irresponsible" by socialist critics of the thirties (including for a time himself) but "a thousand times more progressive," in his allegedly more mature view, "than the shallow political writing of our latter days." Confronted with mounting evidence that the modernist tradition was itself "fast breaking up," as he himself occasionally admitted, Rahv made no effort to analyze this breakup or its consequences. Instead he turned to the more congenial task of berating the critics of modernism—"whole-hog leftists," "impassioned party-liners," and "advocates of Stalinist social-mindedness." As in his defense of Leninism, he confronted criticism of modernism only in its debased versions, ignoring or dismissing out of hand the more serious criticism raised by Lewis Mumford, Van Wyck Brooks, and Waldo Frank. A passing reference, in an essay written in 1939, to the "visibly decaying bourgeois" might have raised the possibility that avant-garde intellectuals, without their historic adversary, would soon lose their very raison

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d'être. Now that the bourgeoisie no longer retains any faith in its own culture and embraces avant-garde styles as its own, the idea of an avant-garde loses its meaning. Under these conditions, art no longer "resists being drawn into the web of commodity relations." On the contrary, alienation itself becomes a commodity, a fashionable attitude with a nearly universal appeal on the cultural exchange. At a time when points of view formerly restricted to the avant-garde have pervaded popular culture, admittedly in degenerate form, Rahv attempted to read revolutionary significance into the artist's long-standing feud with the guardians of respectability. The bourgeoisie in its classic form had disappeared and its culture lay in ruins; yet Rahv continued to write as if assertions of artistic independence, attacks on literary censorship, and denunciations of middle-class sexual morality constituted acts of revolutionary defiance.

In the well-known 1952 symposium, "Our Country and Our Culture"—notable for its celebration of a new accommodation between intellectuals and American culture—Rahv appealed once again for a defense of modernism against "neophilistinism." Congratulating himself on the "vanguard role" he and other independent leftists had played in the thirties, he argued that avant-garde intellectuals had developed a tradition of their own, which made a virtue of their "separation from the mass." Yet his own observation that "the passage of time had considerably blunted the edge of the old Jamesian complaint as to the barrenness of the native scene" raised the question whether "separation from the mass" accurately characterized the intellectual's relation to a permissive, flabby, and endlessly absorbent culture. Rahv's claim that "parvenu conservatives" threatened the "critical traditions of modern thought" missed the mark. Traditionalism, Protestant neo-orthodoxy, the "tragic view of life," and other intellectual fashions of the early fifties signaled not a revival of cultural conservatism but a jaded culture's quest for novelties, a liberal attack on the intellectual foundations of liberalism, a widespread loss of faith presenting itself as a rediscovery of faith.

To pretend that religious traditionalism—"utopianism of the right"—seriously threatened critical modernism, as Rahv wrote in a 1950 symposium on "Religion and the Intellectuals," vastly overrated the importance of the so-called religious revival. In his own estimation an embattled secularist, Rahv overlooked a far more important development: the growth of a culture so thoroughly secularized, so completely without moorings in any tradition of thought, that it could absorb therapeutic doses of religion—or of any other alien influence—without feeling any effects whatever.

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Not until the sixties did Rahv begin to suspect that the "crisis of modern thinking" had something to do with American society's "collapse into total permissiveness." Even then, he refused to admit that the tradition of "critical modernism" bore any share of the blame for this collapse. When critics like Daniel Bell and Lionel Trilling began to argue that the so-called counter culture represented the "logical conclusion" of the modernist movement, in Bell's words—"modernism in the streets," in Trilling's—Rahv resorted to much the same line of argument that he had earlier used against those who drew a direct connection between Lenin and Stalin. Bell's contention, Rahv predictably argued, rested on "the intellectualist fallacy," ignoring "socio-economic actualities." The spread of pornography, the attack on high culture, and the celebration of liberated "life styles" originated not "in any kind of ideology evolved in intellectual circles but in the overwhelming pressures generated by a social system which for some time now has abandoned its former psychology of production, with its correlative internalized restraints and prohibitions, and has gone over to a psychology of consumption unendingly ravenous and inescapably sordid." Bell deplored the irrationality of the New Left but wrote about the American social order, Rahv argued, as if it were "the very incarnation of reason." In fact, the irrationality and "wild permissiveness" of American popular culture grew out of the irrationality of advanced capitalism itself—the "ruthless logic of business calculation."

This argument had the merit of drawing connections between consumer capitalism and the culture of permissiveness, and of making it clear that "the rot is so incremental as hardly to be confined to a few cultural institutions." "The corporate system as a whole is afflicted," Rahv declared. But in absolving the ideology of modernism of any responsibility for the "rot," he made too rigid a separation between "ideology" and the "social system," failing to recognize the former as an important part of the latter. He rejected the "intellectualist fallacy" only to embrace an economic determinism that extracted from a complex historical context a single element, the shift from production to consumption. He did not even concede, as he had conceded in similar debates about Leninism, that the modernist movement contained at least the potential for a postmodernist attack on mind.

Ostensibly materialist, Rahv's analysis of modernism paid too little attention to the concrete historical situation in which modernism took root, flourished, and finally in its decomposition, fertilized mass culture itself. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the intellectuals' revulsion against industrialism led them to celebrate the "pure culture

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of the feelings" (as John Stuart Mill called it) as an antidote to the culture of acquisition. But the attempt to insulate art from everyday life intensified the very traits Rahv deplored in early American writing—its subjectivity, its absorption with private experience, its remoteness from the larger world of collective activity—and thus deprived the modernist tradition of the capacity to criticize industrial society on its own terms. Rahv's charge that the nineteenth-century American classics made a "cult of personal relations" applied to the whole modernist revolt.

Nor did the growth of a class of professional intellectuals improve matters. In his essay on the cult of experience in American writing, Rahv attributed the backwardness of nineteenth-century American culture to the absence of an organized intelligentsia. A more rigorous analysis would have suggested that the emergence of an alienated intellectual class, in America as in Russia, widened the gap between culture and practical life and rendered the "critical traditions of modern thought" increasingly innocuous. A criticism of modern life that tried to make a virtue of its "separation from the mass" ended by becoming in its own right an object of mass consumption. As the rhetoric of loss, estrangement, and anxiety entered popular culture, alienation became no more than an "alternative life-style." Ideas formerly associated with criticism of capitalism became part of the cultural apparatus essential to its survival. The intellectual avant-garde now experiments, in effect, with new styles of consumption, testing them before they go on the mass market. Its routinized search for novelty conforms almost perfectly to the requirements of an economy dependent on planned obsolescence and rapid shifts of cultural fashion.

The "psychology of consumption" can no longer be separated from the liberated "ideology evolved in intellectual circles." They belong to the same configuration of historical forces. The development of advanced industrial society has made theories and practice based on the assumption of an avant-garde untenable, in art as in politics. Rahv's inability to come to grips with this development limits even the best of his work. His defense of critical modernism served a useful purpose in the late thirties, when the very idea of artistic autonomy was under attack from the Stalinist Left, but it does little to illuminate more recent events.

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LETTERS OF CAMUS AND PASTERNAK

The letters printed below were exchanged between Albert Camus and Boris Pasternak during the spring and summer of 1958. At that time, *Doctor Zhivago* had already been published abroad (in Italy in November 1957 and in France in June 1958), but the violent public campaign of abuse to which Pasternak was subjected after he received the Nobel Prize in October 1958 had not yet begun. Nevertheless, pressures were already mounting and he was under great strain. In October 1957, the secretary of the Soviet Writers' Union, Alexei Surkov, hinted in an interview with the Italian Communist party newspaper, *Unità*, that publication of *Doctor Zhivago* abroad would do its author no good. In that same month Pasternak was denounced by the secretariat of the Soviet Writers' Union and the following spring he was again summoned by the secretariat to discuss his sending the novel abroad.

The Pasternak-Camus correspondence is preceded by an extract from a letter from Pasternak to Pierre Souvtchinski, a Russian friend living in France, in which the poet tells of his discovery of Camus.

Pasternak did not sign his letters to Camus in the hope that without his signature they were more likely to get through the Soviet censorship.

Emily Tall

Boris Pasternak to Pierre Souvtchinski

April 14, 1958

How my heart rejoices at the discovery of Camus! I cannot muster the courage to write him about it in my monstrous fractured French. He is most precious to me as a unified whole, as a phenomenon. By that I mean the thrust of his intellect and all that which a powerful

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This correspondence has not been published before. Nineteen eighty marks the twentieth anniversary of both Camus's and Pasternak's deaths. The French originals of these letters will appear in *Canadian Slavonik Papers* (Number 2, June 1980).

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artistic passion ultimately leads to in our time. The shape which it ultimately acquires.

In the final analysis the artist's position on one problem or another is not the most essential thing. Nor are his choices and temporary allegiances. What is crucial is whether or not he will be seized by the wave that also moves time. If so, it will carry him far away, and ultimately all the questions and all the answers will intermingle and drown, becoming but a fading memory.

It is my belief that such is the position of Camus in our era, that he escaped stagnation in that allegedly incontestable novelty which is really embedded in the past and has long ago become ossified. Camus is always in the forefront with the best of his attributes, with his language, his interests, his yearnings, and his tastes. He continues to live, to depart, he is constantly reborn and incessantly renewed by the seriousness of his work and the weightiness of his decisions.

How close all this is to me!

Translated from the Russian by
Maurice Friedberg

Albert Camus to Boris Pasternak

June 9, 1958

Dear Boris Pasternak,

René Char,[1] who is my best friend, gave me your address because he knows the friendship and admiration that I have long felt for your work and the man whom one feels living within. I just wanted to send you a small text whose only importance is that of a far-off, but faithful, sign with regards to you.[2] There are a few of us in France who know you, who share your life, in a certain way. I, who would be nothing without the Russian nineteenth century, I find in you once more the Russia that nourished me and gave me strength. It is false to say that frontiers do not exist. They do exist, temporarily. But at the same time there exists a force of creativity and truth uniting us all, in humility and pride at the same time. I never felt this more than while reading you and that is why I would like to express my gratitude and my solidarity. I send warm wishes to you and yours, for your work and your great country. I shake your hand.

Albert Camus

1. French poet and friend of Camus.
2. Camus's Nobel Prize speech.

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Boris Pasternak to Albert Camus

June 28, 1958

Dear Mr. Camus,

I can hardly believe my eyes, writing to you, Camus. A new page has opened in my life, that of having acquired the pretext, the right,the chance to tell you my delight and my gratitude for the special nuance in the play of today's universal thought, [to tell you] that it is owing to you. A man without principles,[3] whose tip of the hat I returned only because of the dark glasses which made him unrecognizable, who, having taken them off and staggered me with regrets when I recognized him, told me, if one wants to believe him, that he was lucky enough to make your acquaintance and to speak to you, among others, of me. Oh how I regret it! I prefer to be the victim of baseness openly than to seem to be its ally.

I rarely have the time to read what I like and what interests me. Kafka, Faulkner, still not read, wait for me to take them from the library shelf. "Remembrance of Things Past" is broken off at the end of "Sodom and Gomorrah." I exult, I congratulate you for writing a prose whose reading becomes a true journey: one visits the places you describe, one experiences the situations related, one feels them for the main characters. In "The Stranger," above and beyond all the rest, one idea struck me. How, in a naked and unlimited sensualism, sensuality itself becomes obtuse and weak! As if in the interests of its own strength it needed its opposite, that which is the eternal presence of the soul: *pity*. I have your "Fall." I shall read it. My new friendship, if I dare say so, with you, with R.C.,[4] A. de B.,[5] his wife, with P.S.,[6] is an unspeakable happiness, an enchantment, a fairy tale. I catch the inconceivable breath of the garden at dawn, I want to surprise the mystery of the green eclipse of the dense foliage, and I think of René Char, who is all that. Or else I meditate on the absolute originality of art and on what is the task of art, rather than philosophy—seizing the essence of life and saying it palpably, and I think of du Bouchet and the domain of his unfathomable perspicacity. And the state of mind of his wife, magical, enchanted! And you are anxious about what can happen to me and you forget that no price is enough for this new kinship which is infinitely

3. Valentin Katayev, Soviet novelist. Katayev had been against publication of *Doctor Zhivago* in the Soviet Union.

4. René Char.

5. Andre du Bouchet, French poet.

6. Pierre Souvtchinski.

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worth being lived and even suffered for. Thank you, thank you for everything.

August 14, 1958

Dear and great friend, where can I find the words to tell you my profound gratitude for the rare help that your existence gives me, it alone, the order of ideas that are yours alone, your way of seeing things, your work, your being? Will I bring myself to say, without a certain grain of immodesty, how much I am struck by the affinity of our views? Your aspiration for the good that is not ethical but the movement of a soul guided and shaped by a taste for what is great. Before being surprised and embarrassed by your direct and undeserved mention of me (and in what terms!), I understood your dear inscription on the "Speech" about my presence in the book in the figurative sense. Indeed, I almost forgot that I was reading a book conceived and printed in French and that it was not I who was thinking and following everything internally and tacitly in Russian. Such were my delight and my assent, so many times was I ready to exclaim in pure astonishment that such a community of ideas could exist! How consoling, how meaningful for me is everything you say on page fourteen, your statements on truth and liberty, on solitude and love for mankind, on the causal connection between sorrow and beauty. All your thoughts on realism, on the only mature and great style, classical, so to speak, in a continually new sense. That you treat the tragic as something natural, as what is due and even desirable ("To create today is to create dangerously!") is so close to me! There was a moment when I wanted to provide "Dr. Zh." with two epigraphs, a verse from the XC Psalm[7] and a line from Baudelaire ("I know that sorrow is the only nobility."). (I finally crossed them out.) I like your "The Fall" very much, but "The Stranger" made a much greater impression on me. In it I saw everything, experienced everything, felt everything. The heat, the desert of the uninhabited Sunday, the proximity of the sea, the terrible nearness of animate nature and man without heart. I wrote you a card (this is the second one), did you receive it?

Translated from the French by Emily Tall and Linda Orr

7. Psalm 91 in French and English Bibles.

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Eugene Goodheart

THE MYTHS OF ROLAND

The attempt of English and American critics to come to terms with contemporary French criticism suffers, it seems to me, from two opposite disadvantages. Either the Anglo-American critic is so ill-disposed to the work that he makes no adjustment in his language or categories which would permit him to take in what is original, provocative, and instructive in the work, or he is so favorably disposed that, as in the extreme case of a recent book on Roland Barthes by Stephen Heath, he adopts without resistance the categories, language, and ideas of the material he is studying. In either case, a dialectical relationship to the material is impossible. In studying Barthes, and particularly his role as a demystifier, I have attempted to enter into a dialectical relation to his work. My account of Barthes's thought is sufficiently immanent, so that it is recognizable in its own terms; however, I approach him on a terrain not entirely his own, so that he is forced to answer questions which he has not posed to himself.

Much of the advanced criticism written today openly and even pleasurably declares its lack of authority. It shares with the works that provide it with occasions the condition of *écriture*: the liberating experience of writing without an author. When Roland Barthes deauthorizes Balzac's *Sarrasine,* he grants it a freedom it never dreamed of. Not that Barthes is unaware that this new freedom is achieved at a cost. The awareness is already palpable in the mixture of playfulness and anxiety that animates his earlier work, *Mythologies.*

In the preface to that book Barthes warns us that demystification is "a word which is beginning to show signs of wear." We hardly need to be reminded that for Marx, as it had been for the Enlightenment, demystification was the very essence of criticism. All criticism, Marx had written in an early essay, was the criticism of religion: the clearing of the religious mists that surround the sun of truth. Much later in his career when he writes the celebrated chapter on commodity fetishism in

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Capital, Marx finds an analogy for the mystifications of the commodity world in the "mist-filled regions" of the religious life. There is enough of Marx and the Enlightenment in Barthes for us to assume that when he speaks of demystification, he is addressing himself to the very conditions of criticism itself.

I do not mean to suggest that criticism can—or should be—translated exclusively into demystification. Criticism may also be both pious and illuminating, as in the characterization of Biblical style in the opening chapter of *Mimesis* in which Erich Auerbach, with an eloquence expressive of piety, explains the necessity for the empty spaces between the spare facts of the story of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac. To fill the spaces between with descriptions of landscape or with psychological motivation would divert the reader from the goal of Abraham's journey: the reencounter with God on Mount Moriah. Auerbach's pious interpretation is of course criticism—and criticism of a very high order. What it shares with demystification is authority, the confidence that the critic is in possession of the truth, whether it be the truth of the text, or to quote a recent Marxist demystifier, "those conditions of its making (inscribed in its very letter) about which it is necessarily silent." In this perspective, demystification takes on the appearance of an unexpectedly archaic activity, archaic, that is, in its confident hierarchical conception of reality. To be able to evaporate illusion *a* in favor of reality *b* is to engage in an unearned exercise of privilege.

For Marx demystification did not seem to depend on privilege, because he operated on the philosopher's assumption that one must strip the veil of appearances in order to arrive at truth. He could penetrate the false pretensions of commodities to an "existence as independent beings endowed with life, [which entered] into relations with one another and the human race," because he was confident that behind the illusion the real value of the product was ascertainable: the labor expended in its production. And it is not simply the truth or the conviction of truth that Marx possessed. The reality to which the truth corresponded was substantial and filled with promise. In an early attack on the critical criticism of the young Hegelians who seemed to have anticipated modern nihilism, Marx writes:

> Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may bear chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck the living flowers. The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he may think, act, and fashion his own reality as a disillusioned man comes to his senses; so that he may revolve around himself as his real sun.

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But if there is no reality behind the illusion, then to "penetrate the object," is, as Barthes puts it, not simply to liberate, but to destroy it. Demystification for Barthes shows signs of wear, because necessary as it may be, it cannot satisfy the appetite for wholeness, for substantiality, for presence as it did for Marx. "We constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness," Barthes declares almost poignantly at the end of a book apparently devoted to demystification.

Unlike Marx, Barthes does not possess a vision of reality alternative to the myths that he demystifies and consequently from which he excludes himself. His "impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art, and common-sense dress up reality," does not presuppose an authentic nature which the contemporary world betrays. Nature has several meanings and antimeanings, and they all figure in Barthes's rejection of the possibility of the natural world: the real as opposed to the illusory, the normal opposed to the abnormal, the innocent to the corrupt, the artless to the artificial. In *Roland Barthes* (1975), Barthes, reflecting on a theme that has preoccupied him from the beginning of his career, opposes history to nature, claiming for history the power of relativizing nature and making it possible "to believe in meaning in time." In contrast, nature oppressively makes all things motionless, eternal: "like milk spoiled in the disintegrated space of phraseology." This, of course, recalls a Marxian distinction, but the distinction does not provide Barthes with the experience of an alternative plenitude to the empty abstractions of bourgeois Nature. For Marx, history was a natural force comparable to the evolutionary system described by Darwin. All that remains of the natural in Barthes is the honesty of acknowledging that innocence is no longer possible, a purely negative condition, immensely difficult to sustain.

In a remarkable essay on La Rochefoucauld, Barthes examines a particular method of demystification. Through a series of maxims, La Rochefoucauld reduces heroism to ambition, ambition to jealousy, and finally jealousy to "the grandest of all passions (*amour propre*)." Barthes presses beyond *amour propre*. "When the ultimate passion has been discovered it too evaporates into indolence, inertia, nothingness." According to Barthes, La Rochefoucauld has immobilized the process in the maxim, which can be demystified in grammatical terms as a reduction engendered by *ne que*. (*L'heroisme n'est que l'ambition.* Heroism is nothing but ambition.) As Barthes wittily remarks, "*la pessimisme de La Rochefoucauld's n'est qu'un rationalisme incomplet.*" Beyond or underneath the classical "clarity" of La Rochefoucauld's pessimism is the modern *neant*. One wonders, however,

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whether in completing the rational process, Barthes is not participating in the universalist Cartesian assumption of a rational natural sequence of events. The *neant* is as opaque, as arbitrary, as unnatural as any other cultural sign, which can be demystified. Barthes implicitly makes it the only real or natural term in his discourse—despite his relentless explicit denials of all claims to naturalness. How would Barthes accommodate the possibly irreducible experience of plenitude in the lives and works of Wordsworth, Tolstoy, and Lawrence? Barthes simply makes the parochial assumption that La Rochefoucauld's method of demystification, abortive as it is, is the only route that demystification can take: the route to the *vide*, the *neant*. I don't mean to say that the presence of the *neant* in Barthes always reflects a Cartesian bias. As I show later, the *neant* also springs from Barthes's affinity for the Marxist analysis of capitalism. The Cartesian assumption and the Marxist view become mutually reinforcing.

Barthes writes elsewhere: "One cannot 'demystify' from the outside, in the name of ownership [note the connection between authority and demystification as traditionally understood], but one must steep oneself in the void one is revealing." He goes on to say of literature what could be said of the myths which he treats. "Literature [in its indirection] is the very mode of the impossible, since it alone can speak its void, and by saying it, again establish a plenitude." One is tempted to linger on the word impossible, for it is mystifying how literature establishes an authentic plenitude, which itself does not invite demystification. One can only surmise that Barthes maintains a covert allegiance to literature as a privileged domain, so that all he has to do is to present the sign literature and trust that it will carry the day. Barthes equivocates in his use of the term demystification between a view of the method as a process which issues in nothingness, and a view of the method which implies a reality alternative to the mystification. His own method is sanctioned by the first view, but he is unhappy about its consequences (the reason for its showing signs of wear) and he tries to compensate for its destructiveness by arbitrarily claiming plenitude for Literature.

In *Mythologies* Barthes admits that "he cannot see The Promised Land," by which he means that there is no natural or rational order which he can perceive through the present life of things as a basis for a utopian formation. Though he refuses to relinquish a hope for "tomorrow's positivity," the future remains a blank in his work. But that is not all. Having nothing but the present, the temptation to become an accomplice of the present is overwhelming. In characteriz-

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ing Flaubert's intention in *Bouvard et Pecuchet* in *S/Z*, Barthes describes precisely the nature of his relation to the myths of contemporary culture. "The writer's only control over stereotypic vertigo (this vertigo is also that of 'stupidity,' 'vulgarity,') is to participate in it without quotation marks, producing a text, not a parody."

Before examining Barthes's complicity, a few examples of his method in treating contemporary myths would be useful.

> But what strikes one first in the mythology of the *jet man* is the elimination of speed: nothing in the legend alludes to this experience. We must here accept a paradox, which is in fact admitted by everyone with the greatest of ease, and even consumed as a proof of modernity. The paradox is that an excess of speed turns into repose.

The paradox rests on the semantic trick of implicitly identifying speed with strenuous exertion. The important thing to note is the difference between demystification and paradox. In demystification, the thought moves from an illusory appearance to an opposite or subversive underlying truth. What Barthes gives us, however, is something quite different: two facts, or rather a fact (of speed) and an impression (of repose), are held together in an unresolved tension or in a perspective of alternative views.

> The mythology of Einstein shows him as a genius so lacking in magic that one speaks about his thought as of a functional labour analogous to the mechanical making of sausages, the grinding of corn, or the crushing of ore.

Barthes provides us here with the sarcasm he earlier noted as the modern condition of truth. Having reduced Einstein to the antimagic of the machine, however, he restores magic to the machine, at once demystifying and mystifying the process. "Paradoxically" (a favorite word which Barthes understands in its primary meaning as *counter doxa*, against received belief), "the more the genius of the man was materialized under the guise of his brain, the more the product of his inventiveness came to acquire a magical dimension, and gave a new incarnation to the old esoteric image of a science entirely contained in a few letters" (the letters of the equation).

Still another instance, the article on strip tease, provides us with a parable for the resistance to demystification that has become the paradoxical outcome of the logic of demystification. "Woman is desexualized at the moment when she is stripped naked." The shedding of clothes yields emptiness. (Balzac's *Sarrasine*, which Barthes decon-

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structs in *S/Z*, in its unveiling of the castrato Zambinella, is another parable of the process of demystification.)

Demystification is no longer the way by which one arrives at ultimate truth. It may itself be a strategy or tactic for a further mystification. How can we characterize Barthes's performance in the following passage? Is it the ultimate demystification of royalty, or is it a kind of tribute to the inexhaustible resourcefulness of royalty in sustaining its myth?

> . . . kings have a superhuman essence, and when they temporarily borrow certain forms of democratic life, it can only be through an incarnation which goes against nature, made possible through condescension alone: to flaunt the fact that kings are capable of prosaic actions is to recognize that this status is no more natural to them than angelism to common mortals, it is to acknowledge that the king is still king by divine right.

The strategy of myth, as Barthes notes, is to admit the disadvantages of the value or product or institution presented. Having disarmed the skeptic by a pretense of honesty, the myth exalts the value or the product or the institution despite or because of the honesty. A divine art is created by a fleshly body. "A delicious food, tasty, digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances" is produced by the "fatty essence of oleo-margarine." The army as an object of devotion magically emerges from the experience of its cruel discipline (*From Here to Eternity*). Salvation comes to those who have mortified themselves by following the letter of the law, thus justifying the bigotry of the Church (*The Living Room*, Graham Greene). The question remains whether the eliciting of the pattern doesn't confirm the power of the myth rather than demystify it.

If one simply considers the articles translated for the English edition,* *Mythologies* gives the somewhat misleading impression of a playful parody of the artifacts and events of mass culture, verging on complicity. What is excluded is a fairly substantial number of pieces in which Barthes reveals himself to be a skillful demystifier in the Marxist tradition. For example, his dissection of Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* shows how the naïveté of the Brando character becomes the point of view of the film and thus displaces our view of the source of corruption from the capitalists to the gangsters, and the solution of the

*The recently published *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (Hill and Wang; 1979) includes articles from the original edition of *Mythologies* excluded from the American edition.

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problem from working class revolt to Christianity. Barthes's inspiration in this article is Brecht, a long-held admiration, who mastered the art of distancing the spectator from the naive hero, without alienating his sympathy for him. His articles on Poujadism are impressive "demystifications" of petit bourgeois thought, which is motivated by illusory common sense standards of tautology and calculation (of credit and debt), and which quickly settles all questions, dissolves all doubts, and closes up the world. There is a scorn, a moral severity in Barthes's manner in those articles, making one feel at the moment one is reading Barthes that he is in confident possession of the truth. The presence of these articles would seem to justify Barthes's portentous demystifying claim in the long concluding essay on myth that the petit bourgeois spirit lies concealed in the myths. In phrases that echo Marx of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Barthes characterizes bourgeois ideology as an exercise in ex-nomination in which bourgeois reality is dissolved in a vocabulary that is universalistic. To reduce Barthes to Marx, however, is to miss the paradoxical outcome of Barthes's performance. He is less concerned to point a finger at the bourgeois demon lurking in the myths that it generates than he is in examining the process by which the very term bourgeois disappears in the mystification. Without fully knowing it, Barthes is a participant in the process of ex-nomination.

The myths that Barthes treats have indeed become universal. The fact that they originated in the mind of a corporate entrepreneur and are sponsored by the profit motive contributes little, if anything, to our sense of the life they have in the minds of people. "When a typist earning twenty pounds a month *recognizes herself* in the big wedding of the bourgeoisie then [Barthes declares] bourgeois ex-nomination achieves its full effect." But we are no longer in a situation in which the typist's fantasy must be submitted to the perspective of pity and irony. The bourgeois wedding is a real possibility for the typist—as is jet travel. One continues to question the quality of life incarnated by bourgeois marriage and jet travel. On what grounds do we demystify, on what basis do we criticize? And indeed, in an essay, "La Mythologie aujourd'hui," written fifteen years after *Mythologies*, Barthes belatedly recognizes that the modern task is evaluation, not demystification. To be sure, Barthes attributes his perception to the changing times, not to a failure to perceive what was already the case in 1957 when he published *Mythologies*.

The role of demystification vis-à-vis capitalism has always been marked by ambiguity. Marx understood capitalism itself as a demystifying process in which the veil of illusion which so effectively masked

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the economic realities of feudalism is torn asunder and the cash nexus that constitutes the social structure is made manifest. At times Marx seems to view capitalism as the first society to propose an anti-idealist conception of itself. (Incidentally, the deliberate poverty of bourgeois idealization may be the cause of that peculiar phenomenon: bourgeois self-hatred.) At other times Marx stresses the mystifications of bourgeois society, its denial of its particularity in a universal ideology. The greatest of bourgeois slogans, liberty, equality, and fraternity, purports to speak for all men, but actually serves to mask a particular class interest. Even in the realm of production, the end result, the commodity acquires the radiant features of transcendence, a view that conceals its source in human labor. Indeed, so strong is the impulse toward mystification that Marx ruefully remarks: "The recent scientific discovery that the products of labour, so far as they are values, are but material expressions of the human labour spent in their production, marks, indeed, an epoch in the history of the development of the human race, but, by no means, dissipates the mist through which the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves."

Commodities compensate for the religious disenchantments of the bourgeois world. They provide the experience of transcendence that the religious relics of the previous society no longer provide. If Marx hoped that it was only a matter of time before those mists were dissipated, he would surely have been disappointed. For as capitalism develops, its demystifying function weakens and its mystifications become more powerful and impressive. So powerful, in fact, that the ground reality which makes demystification possible seems to have been usurped or to have evaporated. Barthes's French inclination to discover emptiness is enforced by the increasing hegemony of capitalism. He himself suggests a reason for the difference between his situation and that of Marx. "It is possible that in Marx's day the pressure of culture on the proletariat was weaker than it is now; in the absence of 'mass communication,' there was as yet no 'mass culture.'" Without the ground reality, Barthes's use of a Marxist method in the essay on myth is almost parodic. Barthes tries to compensate for the empty prospect created by demystification. "Even here, in these mythologies, I have used trickery: finding it painful constantly to work on the evaporation of reality, I have started to make it excessively dense, and to discover in it a surprising compactness which I savoured with delight."

Barthes is not the first critic to succumb to the temptations of the

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myths of mass culture. In *The Tradition of the New* (1959) Harold Rosenberg found himself annoyed with "the mentality of those who keep handling the goods" of what he calls "the cultural supermarket" while denying any appetite for them. And he singled out Dwight MacDonald for particular scorn. "MacDonald's taste for kitsch is largely negative, but it is genuine, at least genuine enough to yield him the time to become familiar with it. Modern art, however, revolts him; it gives him as much incentive to get to know it as would the gases in a condemned mine." Rosenberg was able to exempt himself from this condition because of his allegiance to high modern art. For Rosenberg as for Barthes, Marxism is a superannuated doctrine, which frees them both to engage in a kind of imaginative play with its categories. Like Marxism, however, modernism has now lost its power of resistance. In its present phase as exemplified by Barthes (a connoisseur and exponent of modernist literature), modernism rather than resisting the myths of mass culture has fully entered into them. I do not know whether Rosenberg has had his say about Barthes, but his strictures against the complicit critics of mass culture would seem to apply when he writes, "The people I am complaining about are the mass-art specialists, particularly the profound ones, those who cannot switch to Channel Four or roll over the corpse in a red chemise without beholding hidden patterns of the soul and society of contemporary man." But Barthes's serious and parodic treatment of contemporary myths would defy Rosenberg's judgment, compelling Rosenberg to articulate an adequate alternative, given the loss of authority of both Marxism and modernism.

Having relinquished Marxism as a basis for a demystifying criticism, Barthes finds himself in the painful negative state of exclusion. The only choice that he says exists for him is unsatisfactory: "either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize, or conversely, to posit a reality which is ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and in this case, poeticize." *Mythologies* concludes with a utopian yearning for "a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge."

Barthes has not reconciled the divisions. Indeed, it is a real question whether the desire for reconciliation is anything more than a rhetorical flourish, a vestige of an older perspective that the very terms of Barthes's discourse has made impossible. If reality is empty or inchoate or a structure realized by another semiotic system, it is not clear that one can speak of reconciliation at all. What are the terms to be reconciled? If one assumes the ontological otherness of reality, all

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that one can say is that in the work that follows *Mythologies*, Barthes seems either to accept the divisions as insurmountable, or, which amounts to the same thing, to allow one of the terms of the division to devour the other term. The equivalent of the ex-nomination of the bourgeois occurs in the triumph of semiosis, the absorption of reality into that willful activity of language which Barthes calls *écriture*.

In one of his essays on Sade, in *Sade Loyola Fourier*, Barthes cheerfully acknowledges that the meaning (semiosis) distorts what is represented (mimesis), and then proceeds to dismiss the mimetic aspect of Sade's work: "It is on the level of meaning not of the referent, that we should read him." The interest of Sade is in the system of words or linguistic units rather than in the admittedly monotonous cruelty of the action. Barthes's claim for Sade resembles a conservative exercise in the domestication of the text: which, of course, it is not intended to be.

Whether language and reality are cut apart from each other (the surgical image in Barthes's) or whether reality is simply absorbed into or distorted by language (Barthes is not consistent), the result is the same: reality never confronts language as a test of its significance, its values, its truth. Sade's greatness lies in his virtuosic manipulation of a vast system of discourse that he has created, not in "having celebrated crime, perversion, nor in having employed in this celebration a radical language." Barthes finds support for his reading in Sade's plausible claim that "I have conceived all that can be conceived along that line, but I have certainly not done every thing I have conceived and I shall certainly never do it." And surely as Barthes notes "the complexity of the combinations, the partner's contortions, the potency of ejaculations, and the victim's endurance all surpass human nature: one would need several arms, several skins, the body of an acrobat, and the ability to achieve orgasm *ad infinitum*." But the evident truth of this claim, so wittily and persuasively phrased, conceals a sleight of hand that is intended to disparage an interest in realism per se (of a Balzac or a Tolstoy, for example). "Why not test the realism of a work," Barthes asks, "by examining not the more or less exact way in which it reproduces reality, but on the contrary the way in which reality could or could not effectuate the novel's utterance?" The question raised about Balzac and Tolstoy would receive a quite different answer from the one raised about Sade. But the more important point to make is that Barthes asks the question in a rhetorical manner, clearly interested in the way in which reality *can not* effectuate the novel's utterance. What occupies Barthes is that aspect of a work which is autonomous, irreducible, free of the constraints of reality.

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In his preface to *Sade Loyola Fourier,* Barthes anticipates the criticism that he may be engaged in an exercise of domestication by reasserting the theme of *Mythologies.* Since "there is no language site outside bourgeois ideology, the only possible rejoinder is neither confrontation nor destruction but theft," i.e., the appropriation of the language of the tests for his own purposes.

The manner of the demystifier remains, but its content, so to speak, has been dissolved. Demystification presupposes not only the existence of a substantial reality anterior to its expression, it also assumes the possible ideal transparency of language, so that reality can always challenge the words which are supposed to express it. It is the assumption that lies behind Pascal's performance in *The Provincial Letters;* it is the basis of Orwell's confidence in the power of decent and capable men to express the truth about reality.

The belief in the transparency of expression has always been a *bête noire* for Barthes, who disposed of its claims on ideological grounds in the early work *Writing Degree Zero,* by attributing it to the classical period in which the bourgeoisie began its rise to power. On linguistic grounds, Barthes views clarity as an illusion, which simply ignores the hermetic self-enclosed character of all semiotic systems. The failure of language to be perspicuous to reality is not an occasion for regret. For Barthes it is the obverse of the power, the pleasure and the freedom of the literary mode. Barthes's allegiance to verbal hermeticism (it is clearly not a limitation for Barthes) is an expression of a residual commitment to mystery. The "unspoken depths of reality" have entered into language itself.

For all of Barthes's capacity for demystification, his temperament goes counter to it. To demystify is to be out of sympathy with the text. The demystifier invents a structure against the visible structure of the text. In the act of making his structure visible he may pass from the condition of impotence to the illusion of power. But it is an illusion based on the sense of exclusion and informed by resentment. If demystification originally and ideally represented an effort to restore the truth and integrity of things, it has become both a vision and a condition of alienation, a symptom of powerlessness and a vain attempt to compensate for it. The demystifier's unfulfillment becomes a kind of asceticism, a mark of spiritual superiority. Hedonist that he is, Barthes finds the spirituality of unfulfillment uncongenial.

The social expression of a fulfilled condition is aristocratic society in which values have an impressive physical incarnation: impenetrable, irreducible, and poetic in Barthes's sense. The aesthetic appear-

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ances of the aristocratic world have an ultimate reality that precludes the possibility of demystification. When Jane Austen evokes Pemberley Estate (in *Pride and Prejudice*), she presents an unproblematic, unalienated set of values, immediately apprehendable in our visualization of the estate.

> . . . It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills;—and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!

In the depiction of Pemberley Estate, nature and art are indissolubly wedded, each preserving its integrity without cost to the other, a condition that leaves nothing to be desired and gives no reason for demystification. In contrast to the fullness of aristocratic life associated with its relation to the land, demystification which exposes emptiness would seem to be linked to capitalism. As Balzac has shown and Barthes has noted, Parisian riches are founded on the emptiness of financial speculation.

For Roland Barthes, criticism is the creation of a verbal space, comparable to an aristocratic estate, in which one is provided with pleasures impossible in contemporary reality. Among those pleasures, Barthes somewhat furtively imports "charms (not values) of the bourgeois art of living" which from the point of view of socialism or whatever we call the society that transcends bourgeois society, would be a kind of exoticism: the revolutionary conscience continues, however, to trouble. "What rises up against this dream is the spectre of totality, which demands that the bourgeois phenomenon be condemned *entire*, and that any leak of the signified be punished." (*Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes). The critical intelligence names and classifies the objects of the space, which it has created and rules like a god. It is as if the metaphor of the writer creating a world is literalized or substantiated. The body of the world enters the process of writing, so that writing becomes a physical presence equivalent to reality. This is Barthes's myth of *écriture*.

The bodily character of *écriture* has interesting political implications. Bodies are finite and individual, not infinite and universal. Each person's verbal space is sacrosanct, just as each person's body is

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inviolate. Barthes's value terms are *différence* and *pluriel.* He protests against the tyranny that one language tries to impose on another. Différence "dispenses with triumphs." The increasing inwardness of his work (*Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes and *A Lover's Discourse*) has led Barthes to confessions of insecurity. His liberalism is not simply a concession to otherness. It proceeds from an unwillingness, based on insecurity, to over-value his own *imaginaire de la solitude* (the image-system of solitude). His Nietzschean perception of the will to power inherent in all languages leads him in an un-Nietzschean direction to the condition of resisting its murderous innocence. It is the other Nietzsche, who has transcended the contentions of power, who provides an analogous image to Barthes's dream of happiness. Nietzsche's utopia is an anticommunity of artists, each creating his own world of beauty and power, which he governs with absolute authority. Nietzsche remarks somewhere: "Hundreds of profound lonelinesses together form the city of Venice: this is its charm, a picture for the men of the future." Barthes proposes an anarchist utopia, which bypasses the necessity of making a revolution.

In *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes one is struck by a persistent suggestion, indeed an offering of, a psychogenic basis for his thought as he himself had earlier offered a psychoanalytic understanding of the work of Michelet and Racine. Referring to the intimidating authority of the *natural,* Barthes speaks ironically of "how natural it is, in France, to be Catholic, married, and properly accredited with the right degrees." It is difficult to see how Barthes has suffered from being a Protestant or from his failure (resulting from illness) to have received an aggregation and a doctorate. (After all, he has recently acceded to a chair in the College de France.) But Barthes's homosexual preference is unquestionably a continuous source of anxiety as it was for Proust (his favorite writer), Gide, and is for Genêt. It is, I would suspect, the origin of his persistent need to assert the sacrosanctness of his own *imaginaire de la solitude.* Barthes goes beyond the usual apologetics for homosexuality by deuniversalizing it, insisting on the plural term, homosexualities. What Barthes can be said to achieve is a kind of imaginative onanism in which one need not defer to, indeed one need scarcely acknowledge the other. I am not so much proposing a psychoanalytic reduction or should I say demystification, as I am a correlative to what is "finally" a linguistic phenomenon.

Barthes's complicity with contemporary myths, his indiscriminate pleasure in the verbal systems of Sade, Loyola, Fourier (so different from one another in their content, yet so alike in their *écritures,* the bodies of their endless desire) seems perverse and puzzling only if we

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continue to expect of Barthes what we have traditionally expected of criticism, an authoritative discourse that clarifies or subverts the text or that provides it with a context for an understanding of its social or moral bearings. Barthes's criticism leads neither to understanding in the traditional sense nor to the generation or support of creativity in the inherited imaginative forms. Barthes is not obliged to satisfy traditional expectations. I admire his keen problematic sense of the critical enterprise. Yet he constitutes a threat to that enterprise when in deauthorizing the text he authorizes the critic only to destroy the dialectic between the mind of the critic and the mind of the text. The effect is a double loss of authority. In characteristically disarming fashion, Barthes admits as much in an essay "The Death of the Author," ". . . historically, the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic . . . criticism (be it new) is today undermined along with the Author." It is the self-indulgent reader who emerges at the expense of the author and the critic.

Barthes's pacificism, his horror of the intimidation of languages, makes him want to avoid what the dialectician would consider the fruitful conflict between languages, each claiming authority. Moreover, the terms that incarnate difference are empty at the center, so that what is ultimately "real" is the difference and what sustains the difference is the nonencounter, the space between. Barthes's admiration for Japanese manners is precisely in the nontransgressive and hence nondialectical relation of one to the other, each gesture concealing or expressing an emptiness at the center which must be respected and protected. In contrast, occidental manners proceed from an aggressive conviction of the authoritative fullness of one's being.

What Barthes gives us in splendid fashion is "the empire of signs" (the title, incidentally, of his book on Japan): the aristocratic space of the verbal virtuoso. A socio-historical perspective on Barthes might link his work with that of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, who cultivated a reality-free abstractness as a compensation for their lack of actual social and political power. In the case of the *philosophes*, as Tocqueville has shown in masterly fashion, abstraction took the form of generalizations about the nature of man and society. Despite Barthes's "demystification" of the transparency of these generalizations, he shares with these aristocrats of the intellect an aversion to the constraints of concrete realities. Encouraged by the verbal bias of French culture (in contrast, for example, to the experiential bias of American culture), Barthes is able to sustain this aversion through an extraordinary belief in the transcendent power of language.

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POEMS

Thomas R. Sleigh

ON HOLIDAY

It does not matter that the house is burnt,
All the children scattered, that the grass
Cannot remember their footsteps in the park,
Or that the sun has grown older,
For its time was not theirs, and never was . . .
Their shouts and movements in the shadows

Of the palms have ceased to exist beneath this sun.
As men they may remember their young limbs' abandon,
But they will never see the sun in its whispering ring,
Whispering encouragement, to desert them in their prime.
It is not that we deserve to hold to anything,
But are found as on a holiday, on a veranda

In a storm, and watch the wind pitching across the houses
And the decks, the sea-surface heaving, light gibbering
In the clouds. Then, the air is cooled,
Not a word is spoken, the pageant moves without applause
To find its exit on the horizon,
And we are left, still embraced by the wet

And the sudden purple light lifting high above the town.
The lights submerged in the bay, coming on, are the echo
Of the crickets as they surround our every movement
And then fall still. We sit and listen to our host,
Who will talk later each passing night,
Telling us of the coast, and exotic shells.

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Judith Johnson Sherwin

SUSSEL ATTEMPTS THE SEDUCTION / OF HIS PLATE GLASS FISH

i am only a plate glass fish, you seem to say. *how can i satisfy you?*

understand that i have singled you out from all other fish, those with fins that comb the brine, those whose scales sport tiny feathers, those with superbly droopy upper lips, those that lie boiled and staring intelligently on my milk glass fish plates.

i am not a worthy object of affection, you silently tell me. *desire is essentially an unreflective structure.*

but the fact that i have chosen you transforms you at once into the only appropriate receptacle of my passion.

dear fish, you are more than a collector's item, more than the mere object of antequarian zeal, more than a rhetorical device, however ornamental. you are my challenge, my Galatea, my antiself. Lilith herself could not flash her fishy loins at me more brilliantly than you do in certain slants of light.

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surely if i learn to impregnate my plate glass fish without splitting it apart at the invisible seams, if i coddle my ichtheous amour, if i polish this aquatic alembic, if i bring this glassy womb of bent light rays to full term

what cannot i do with a mere woman

if i apply my mind?

passion slithers most fitly, you concede, *when the occasion is less than adequate to the emotion.*

have i then focussed your fire upon me?

no, you point out, with an adorable flicker of your dorsal, *but you have cracked my silence.*

(from *Impossible Loves*)

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Martin Brown

NIETZSCHE REMEMBERED

1. After Nietzsche came, we took our jackets off.
   I got a haircut for a quarter. This was a long time ago.
   It was in the morning.

2. We had stayed up all night eating candy.
   We didn't want to eat candy, we knew it
   was bad for us, in general, bad for our teeth.
   We'd feel guilty about eating candy, the
   crunch and squish of hard suckers in our mouths.
   We felt rotten already. And
   we liked that feeling.
   We liked it a whole lot.

3. Nietzsche asked me point blank if I had read his work.
   We were both pretty blitzed. I had no idea he was going
   to bring that up again. I told him that I had read him,
   smiling, but that wasn't the reason I liked him, even though
   he was one of the best philosophers, if not *the* best,
   who ever put a pen to paper.
   Nietzsche looked at me, then stared in his beer.
   He really was a deep well of a man.

4. We were late and Nietzsche knew it.
   Still, he refused to shave any faster,
   tie his tie, comb that awful hair.
   He turned toward me and said
   something about the importance
   of working through a problem,
   when the roots of it became suddenly perceptible.
   He said it was more important than combing his hair.
   The Blue Danube flooded in my ears.

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David Chaloner

SUN HOUSE PROPAGANDA

The hot june days of august push
their advantage to the limits of public opinion
rising through the eighties in banner headlines

An embossed footpath slopes persuasively
from the flimsy shade of summer foliage
flanked by dry lawns scuffed and dull as old shoes

The day opens all its windows
into the thick of things

Abandoned deck chairs sag over smudged shadows
in cohesive light and dusty layers
that deceive the eye

And all those matters thought devious or complex
pause for a while and then dissolve
leaving a muddle of anxious reflections

About to move again
the air shakes out a specious drumming
pressing furrows into the emulsified surface
of the ornamental pond with a shrug
And the mind you change retains the thought
of water in a glass fogged by condensation
heading for the sun

Distorting the line of least resistance
the line you read
to verify the hazard of present events

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James Sherry

TO REPAIR INADEQUACIES

Of former efforts when I
dare serve you canapes when snow
blocks passes catch my mind circling
butterfly pinned alive,
no dog knows my smell of Lepke
ankle bangles on crosstown bus
like star rising in flame flamingo
infantware prefer fallen fruit
like pacifists not Spartan summer
millionaire leap from LL Bean catalogue
love more like loafers polished
like rosewood yachts willing to face
the world without a face your legs
conceal turncoats in a lineup
too excited you buckle me down
with a pat I leap up
leaving you angry Tuesday
in a chrome oyster cinema shamelessly
using all stock market quotations
dying poet whose family will not
visit will subdue impulse to kiss
her grey face she no longer shaves
being absorbed into coal age fur
enthusiasm but sin strung me
outside every moral value system
ends in nihilism reverting again
to original absurdity me
ending apologies you think have
only just begun

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Kathleen Spivack

DAPHNE

The only words I know how to write are leaves;
the only way I know how to be is loyal:
one of those women facing the sea and grieving—
it is surprising how much I can keep to myself.

The only dance now is you and me swaying,
trapped like the ancients, caught in the classic frieze:
and now I am running away while you follow,
one hand outstretched, your mouth an O of astonishment.

At the end of the grove the sea sparkles;
the day opens once more as if nothing has happened.
Naked, you pursue me round a ceramic curve
of red and black figures, like the shores of north america.

Who would have thought the old themes could travel so far?
Yet even now in this new land you are betraying me
just as I wait for a god to enter me,
mute, polymorphous; any shape is possible:

just as a relationship of pursuit
is only possible while both of us are moving.
The sea purifies, so why aren't I happy
standing still, hearing a crow call, blotting out my life?

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Jeremy Reed

A MOMENT'S HESITATION

Squeezed down the rock stair before dawn,
canting its tortuous limber
to keep pivot against a sheer

wind-shaft that would unskewer,
rock, person, or car, five hundred
feet into a hoarseness of foam,

boiling with that unappeasable
glare, siphoned from the Atlantic's
aorta, its incessant stun

of grey smoke. And in a recess
heard them. A man's fingering voice
pressing another's hesitance

into a tractable wheedling,
turning as though upon glass, half
disputing the opium's price,

half climbing to create a hold
in the remoteness, a tactile
resonance against danger,

a thermometer line in the
dark. And wondered at going on
down, while such enmity wagered,

listening in turn for my boat's
taciturn signal, and afraid,
while implacable seabirds roused.

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Gregory Given

A CONDITION

Beaches offer a way to designate
Undergoings of the sea (our visits to its side)
As what's left over of what in us did reside,
Perfunctorily—now seen,
Among wash-ups of great thinking—
Little hopes pre-sweetened by trust in hope.

Then it recedes and all is shell and irony.
And the careful, marveling walk to the untight grains
We realize is our commission. Wanting
Something like hope again, anger is easy.
The disinvited sea, from now on a poltergeist,
Sits
Stricken by our nerve.

Few have heart to organize. Mostly
Bad flute-playing is heard, dances scrambled.
Sun after sun goes down like praying heads.
One laugh—obscene enough—could strike it back.
That humor enthroated into speech,
"Coming out in the wash" remains slain by slang.

Islands are made.

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John Stehman

SHEET METAL SCREWS

He goes into the room. There is a table.
She is lying on the table, as if in a hospital.
She is prepared to leave this life. After 40 years
together, they are going to make love,
one last time. He is in his undershorts, T-shirt
and socks . . . she wears loose underwear
beneath a sheet. There are no flowers.
There is understanding, a smile, a brief
touch. He begins to mount her on the table.
You can see his boner rising in his shorts.
He puts his hand up under the sheet, along
her leg, up the leg of her shorts. There
is a note on a small piece of paper, folded.
He unfolds it, stopping his advance, and reads:
"There is a surprise for you in the cupboard, Jack."
He goes to the cupboard, opens it, and finds,
near the front edge of the shelf, a jar.
It is filled with sheet metal screws, ½" by #8,
with a Phillips head.

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Jared Smith

ENTERING THE ROOM OF THE LATE POET

This table is a borrowing
of a dead universe once crowded with dimensions
which swam through until given names.
It is the burial ground of bones of love
packed so close that they became one.
And the fingers that wove the almost-nonexistent boundaries
are now the same creations of another mind.
The work is not lost except as a catbird beneath a bush;
the breath shatters in a morning rain.

They say, wherever they speak of the man,
the cold slab leading to his door was never washed;
but so many passed that way it had no dust of differentiation.
Dogs howled in the garden of his spring when the lake was dry—
maybe sensing when the mouth is still all words are spoken
in the case of a man who likes to speak.

And they say the last manuscripts written there—
the pile of papers by the matchburn in the wood—
will kill the man who prints them; will save the man who reads.
But stories and heroes have a way of being much too big—
there is no dimension for them in the tables of our time,
and that is where we live. Maybe once . . .
but this is a borrowing.

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Maureen Bloomfield

UPHAM PARK

It broke and I saw again
Figures without smoke. I looked inside:
An alley patched with tomato skins,
Pigeons shredding crusts of bread as
An old woman leaned from a third story
Shaking out a rag, the last
Spidery flecks on leaves and windowsills.
He said he knew the way out of here, but was
A remembered voice, a spotlight
Trained on the vanishing water,
The sky impenetrable to Mexico.

A man presses something toward a woman.
Small, it fits a hand.
She laughs, throwing her head back, then
Shudders as if collapsing.
Years collect in the trapped water, letters
Left in trunks of cars; carcasses of needlefish
Rehearse the tide, its disappearance
I count on, for it is better
In memory, and clear—
What the night was catching up to,
What we were thinking in the mirror.

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Richard Tillinghast

BLUE
(after Mallarmé)

The serene irony of infinite blue—
    beautiful without trying, like flowers,
unnerves yr. local poet,
    who calls his gift a curse, and just survives
crossing a desert peopled by tragedies.

Running away, my eyes closed, still I feel it gaze
    with its stone-age remorse, into my hollow soul.
Where is there to run?
    What haggard night can I seize with my hands
to throw, bleeding, in the face of this contempt?

Climb, fogs!
    Release your monotonous powders into the blue,
your ragged lines of snow,
    to drown the dark November days.
Put up a white ceiling of silence.

And you! Drift in from oblivious swamps
    just this side of Hell—
clutching to you as you come, slime and pale roses—
    You, Precious Boredom, fill with a tireless hand
the great blue holes the birds keep making in the sky.

Let the sad chimneys incessantly smoke!
    Let a wandering prison of smog
—fear seeping through its black bars—
    asphyxiate the sun,
morbidly yellow on the horizon.

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The sky is dead. Matter, I'm returning to you.
Let this over-the-hill martyr forget his numberless sins
and even his cruel Ideal,
as he comes to share the straw bed
where the happy human cattle lie.

There, at last, since my brain is used up,
like an old jar of rouge thrown out in the trash,
and no longer has the art to cosmetize
thoughts that come sobbing to the surface,—
there I'll try to yawn myself to death. . . .

No! Blue wins.—I hear it sing in the bells.
My soul, it gives itself a voice
to frighten us even more
as it pushes us into the ground.
In living steel it sings blue angel-song.

It rolls through the mist, an ancient thing,
and cuts through your native agony
like a confident sword.
Where is there to go in this useless and crazy rebellion?
It haunts me! Blue! Blue! Blue! Blue!

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Edward Hirsch

FACTORIES

Everywhere in New York City there are factories
flinging their broken windows into the streets
raining sawdust and glass crying out with the
soft voices of women whispering Puerto Rican names
whispering my name and wearing their dark shadows
like petticoats and their graffiti like too much makeup
over their scarred bricks their used up bodies

yes they are always stained they have walls
broken off like the stumps of cripples
I'm sorry but this is how it is with me
everywhere I turn I find the ruined mouths
and damp animals of yes and when
I lie down to sleep at night I hear

dry pistons setting into motion like
galloping horses yes their hooves are echoing
on concrete their hearts are hammering
they are churning like diesels bursting out of
tunnels out of mountains out of factories
and shedding silence like an extra skin yes
pumping blood through the stillness of my arteries

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F. Keith Wahle

MODERN LIVES

Richard thinks successfully to his last self, "I like the way
these teens get wet pants." He imagines himself. The sky
blooms;
petals fall in the cracks. The old people go on and continue to
go on. This is the kind of girl your daughter will marry, dreams
of impregnating millions.

Lucy cleans her house. She brushes her teeth. Lucy cleans her
pants. She takes care of the old people who are everywhere at
once. They go away with her ropes. She wants them to go away
with her ropes.

Deborah says, "Kidnapping people is no fun." She wants to go
for
a ride on his pistol. She wants to get old and be everywhere at
once. She wants to know everyone. She puts on her rings with
her
fingers. She wants to begin to eat.

Robert moves closer to Judy's bedroom. He watches her all over.
Sometimes she wants to change places. She thinks to herself,
"wet
pants." Robert is busy making up words. He makes up
"modern."
Later he makes up "hockey game." Judy wants to be a popular
singer.

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L.S. Asekoff

DARK TARGETS

What will ferry us across the swart seasons?
That little packet boat with orange stacks—
Smudge on our horizon?

Dioramas of the day announce lilac coast, ashen sea,
City of camellias & the dovecote stars.

Overhead, muffled voices circle our sleep
Awaiting the final signal to descend.

Friend, the indifferent eye
Choosing to paint the hand that paints
Hazards all.

From the far west wall
A drowsy sailor hoists this pale flag.

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Max Phillips

THE BURNING GIRL

On Highland Place, where time is "killing me,"
in May, a kind flaw widens in my sight
as I study out on the braille lawn:
Out of the paddies, toward the ivy spire
she breaks, but cannot wander out of fire,
sealed in a sounding bell of light, private,
where orange cats tear at the afternoon
and I harrow the steep text for my Degree.

I see the next fire balloon to Oz
approach. This must be something in my head.
Past lecture halls I see her rot and swerve.
She tries to bend away the flaying wands,
to part the orchid curtain with her hands.
Flame sorts the body, wine and terrific bread
parted and held from her to be observed.
Flame holds the body in an upright vase.

When dark comes, the cars light, and within my
window, distracted headlights float in dusk
and seem to peer somewhere above the landscape.
Above, huge, building . . . I see a cloud lean down
on yellow roofs, to fumble at her town.
Doors, windows light, open to flying shapes.
Rhododendron invades the school with musk,
fire. She cannot stray back into memory.

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Daniel Aaron

FICTIONALIZING THE PAST

"Saucy lictors
Will catch at us like strumpets, and scald rhymers
Ballad's out a' tune. The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
O' th' posture of a whore."

A kind of novel is being written today that may be best described as extrafictional or pseudohistorical. More fiction than fact, it boldly mixes historical events and real personages with invented ones—usually with satirical intention. The historian, John Lukacs, calls it "novelized history," for want of a better name, but it might just as well be labeled "factitious" or "sham" history, for it is contrived and synthetic. It is not written to instruct or to illuminate or to recreate the American past. It makes little use of myth or legend. History in such novels furnishes props for the fictive decor. The authors employ as principal characters people who were or are history-makers themselves and imagine them as they might have been but were not. History itself may feed the plots, but it is history idiosyncratically conceived as burlesque, parody, hallucination. "Novelized history," whether it denigrates or celebrates, usually trivializes. It is present minded and future oriented rather than backward looking, its account of the past derisive rather than affectionate or forbearing or contemplative. Its purpose is ulterior.

Novelized history is likely to be written during periods of fear and social dislocation when the fictive imagination is susceptible to catastrophe and nightmare. At such times the writer is encouraged to read his own terrors into the cosmos and almost obsessively sniffs the rot and evil of his times. Not invariably, but often, the writer will present his Wasteland in the form of black farce as Nathanael West did in his lunatic novel of the 1930s Depression, *A Cool Million*—a

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burlesque on American would-be Hitlers and on the hypocrisy of the American gospel of success. Among West's targets were John D. Rockefeller, who claimed to have run his business according to the Golden Rule, and Calvin Coolidge, author of the imperishable piece of wisdom, "When men are out of work, unemployment results." The special quality of West's brutal and disdainful parody is suggested in a passage from Herman Melville's novel, *Pierre*, quoted by West's biographer: "in the hour of unusual affliction, minds of a certain temperament find a strange, hysterical relief in a wild, perverse humorousness, the more alluring from its entire unsuitableness to the occasion." West, however—unlike the writers I am about to discuss—used the historical scene only as a backdrop for his fable. He invented grotesque parodies of unnamed but real people (he had President Coolidge in mind and a well-known Fascist demagogue), but although history becomes nightmare in his fiction, he does not write what I have defined as novelized history.

Writers of novelized history are likely to find more popular and lucrative subjects in the "visitable past," to borrow Henry James's term, than in remote times about which most modern readers seem to know or care little. Their books do not have much in common with such historical novels as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* or *Burr* whose authors take liberties with facts but who manage all the same to evoke the historical shudder. William Styron's story of a slave insurrection seemed all too topical to some readers. It was denounced as a covert defense of racism and triggered an insurrection of its own. Yet Styron's formulation of a shadowy historical personage, however distorted it might seem to his critics, is what he calls it: a "meditation" on history, an exercise of the historical imagination by a novelist contemplating the inner lives of characters rooted in antebellum America. Gore Vidal's *Burr* appears to be a tour de force, more adroit than deep; in fact it is a considered judgment of a personality and an age by a writer for whom American history is virtually a family affair. It might be said of Styron and Vidal, as H.B. Henderson III wrote of their distinguished predecessors, that for both "History becomes myth, a collection of traditional tales which are timebound yet possess contemporary relevance and emotional force."

The same with considerable reservations applies to Beryl Bainbridge's *Young Adolph*, a ferociously comic account of Hitler's brief sojourn in Liverpool, England, shortly before World War I (an invented episode that brilliantly foreshadows the subsequent career of the clownish and warped hero as well as some of the horrific events

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associated with his name and times) and to Jerome Charyn's *The Franklin Scare*—"A Novel About the True Life and War-Time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, J. Edgar Hoover, and a Sailor Named Oliver Beebe."

Charyn's book has the earmarks of novelized history. It is a scandalous story of backstage official Washington in 1944, a kind of scabrous equivalent of William D. Hassett's *Off the Record with F.D.R., 1942-1945*, which Charyn, I suspect, used as one of his sources. It is full of the gossip about the Roosevelts' domestic life and the rivalry of government agencies. It contains allusions to popular songs, baseball players, newspaper columnists, and the like. Yet what might well have become simply another exercise in black comedy and the studiedly perverse turns into an evocative fantasy. The action is hyperbolic, the characters dreamlike, the true and apocryphal blended, but if Charyn distorts and caricatures the traits of his notables, he neither cheapens nor sentimentalizes them.

We see them through the eyes of Seaman Oliver Beebe, a cross between Billy Budd and the Good Soldier Schweik. He is F.D.R.'s barber and surrogate child; Fala's caretaker and companion to Eleanor Roosevelt (a comic yet noble figure as impressive in her way as "The Boss"); he is diner-out with his "Uncle Edgar" J. Hoover, whom Charyn transforms into a wonderful wizard-like presence, half Caligula, half Robin Hood; he is an object of fascination to Stalin and the Russians and a "Rasputin in seaman's dress" to Churchill and the British. Involved willy-nilly with crazies and whores, Trotskyists and fascists, and veteran of sexual encounters with his sister, Oliver throughout retains his natural goodness and tact and fidelity and his fondness for Tootsie Rolls without ever discovering how his sexual indiscretions could have brought down the Administration. Charyn relates Oliver's odyssey in an inventive style, simple and declarative, that is appropriate to his hero's bluntness and simplicity. He is witty and funny but never smirks at the reader or hits him over the head.

Candidean books of this sort are often disquieting not merely because they handle sacred cows sacrilegiously but because they give the outrageous a tragi-comic dimension and make moral judgments profanely. Hence they are received with more gingerliness and less delight than slick spoofs like E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* which is not at all disturbing. A few grouches here and abroad panned *Ragtime* when it came out, but reviewers all across the critical spectrum scarcely found words enough to express their delight in Doctorow's "viscerally satisfying" achievement which "read like a streak," "altered one's view

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of things," and "managed to seize the strands of reality and transform them into a fabulous tale."

Ragtime has already been scrutinized sufficiently to see what ingredients went into its concoction. John Lukacs sums up Doctorow as a highly talented trickster who fails to make history come alive because he has no "subtle feel" for it and lacks the gift of authentic novelists like Edith Wharton or F. Scott Fitzgerald to convey a deep and intense vision of an age through imaginary characters. He writes, says Lukacs, "sheer movie stuff." And perhaps that is the best way to look at *Ragtime* as the episodes unroll under the author's hovering camera eye. Its sets are expensive and accurate. Parts of the film-cum-novel have been shot on location, and the actors really look like the people, famous and anonymous, they are intended to represent. Written in an archly simple prose and salted with sex and violence and zany humor, *Ragtime* is a pastiche of highbrow and popular: a novel of Kleist; biography and autobiography; a game of names (some of them easily spotted, others a little harder) for readers to play; and a star-studded cast of honest-to-God historical figures—financier, industrialist, courtesan, anarchist, explorer, savant, magician, monarch—all mingling higgledy-piggledy and staring out of the pages as if from the brown-tinted rotogravure section of an old newspaper.

Since a good many of Doctorow's appreciative readers have been conditioned to look upon the current American scene as a continuing Johnny Carson show where entertainers, athletes, and professional celebrities sit side by side prominent writers and politicians and scientists, the journalistic license with which he exhibited his luminaries must not have seemed very unusual to them. Today a vast audience is privy to the sex life, medical history, and "agonizing decisions" of presidents and basketball players. Persons of consequence have become the intimates of everybody, yoked in the popular mind by their mutual recency. There is nothing new, of course, in the public's relish for behind-the-scenes behavior of famous and notorious people, but for a long time the source of rumors about them was the gossip column and the gutter press. Then at some point, it may have been shortly after World War II, men and women in the news were subjected (or they accommodated themselves) to a new kind of exposure. Suddenly Ike and Mamie, Jack and Jackie, Lyndon and Ladybird, Dick and Pat, along with the lesser fry, became characters in a national "All in the Family" TV series. Even before the horrendous sixties and seventies, Americans of all ages had learned from the Media to regard the eminent as their familiars.

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Their curiosity and their appetite for the "low-down" extended beyond the private lives of the famous to the important events the famous ostensibly participated in and affected. The secrecy surrounding American military and diplomatic adventures and certain undiscussed phases of domestic politics—especially those growing out of the Vietnam war and Watergate—encouraged lurid speculation about what was really going on behind closed doors. Unsavory revelations (some of them pretty wild) dug up by investigative teams, inspired even wilder fictions. Here was incontestable proof of national rottenness, fresh evidence to buttress the texts of a hundred profane moralists. What could supply more relevant themes for "apocalyptic parody" with its helter-skelter sequences, its jumbling of historical facts, its cartoon characters, and its kaleidoscopic narrative line?

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* comes directly out of this frenetic ambience. An oversized parody lit up by coruscating verbal fireworks and at moments savagely comic, it has none of the funny-funny humor of genial *Ragtime* or the off-beat comedy of *The Franklin Scare.* Coover is out to get America and scorns Doctorow's calculated palliatives. His countrymen are as "perverse, rapacious, atavistic" as Cooper's half-savage frontier renegades, "civilized in externals but savage at heart" like Melville's John Paul Jones. Whitman's dark diatribe against American corruption in 1871 might serve as a motto for *The Public Burning*: "the dominance of greed, the hell of passion, the decay of faith, the ceaseless need of prophets." Coover's America is all this and more, but although he flourishes the shreds and tatters of his research, his findings corroborate a predetermined conclusion. He is less historian than social pathologist.

The novel's action is compressed into three days of June 1953. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg's ordeal will culminate in a Grand National Lynching Bee, for they have collaborated with the Phantom, the epitome of everything alien and evil, and relinquished to him and his minions America's Holy Grail—the Bomb. It is a time of fearful tensions at home and elsewhere. The nation's troops are stalled in Freedom's War, and Joseph McCarthy cries treason to receptive ears. In this atmosphere of mass hysteria with the population terrified by threats of nuclear attack, the Rosenbergs are framed by the Power Structure and condemned to be electrocuted in Times Square while the world looks on. The traitors who disarmed the U.S.A. and conspired to kill our soldiers in Korea must suffer the vengeance of a wronged people. After delays and crises, the "burning" takes place.

Vice-President Richard Nixon is Coover's informing intelligence.

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The story crazily unfolds in his monologues, and most of the other leading actors—Eisenhower, the Rosenbergs, Judge Kaufman, Supreme Court justices, politicians, and a supporting cast of thousands are revealed through his feverish consciousness. Authorial reflections provide additional commentary on the developing nightmare as do Coover's dramatic "Intermezzos." The president delivers a fireside chat on "The War Between the Children of Light and the Sons of Darkness" and later turns down Ethel Rosenberg's plea for clemency; the Rosenbergs, in "A Last-Act Sing Sing Opera," refuse to cooperate with the government and protest against their illegal and vindictive penalty as the "Chorus" of public opinion assails the two culprits. At various points the National Poet Laureate, *Time* magazine personified, delivers his messianic messages based "on inner vision and imaginary 'sources'" and articulates in racy *Time*-ese the vision of the Republic.

Presiding over the entire extravaganza is Coover's mighty incarnation of America, Uncle Sam, a composite of Sam Slick and Sut Lovingood. Uncle Sam is Coover's *Deus ex machina.* He harangues his children with floods of vicious, exuberant, and scatological tall talk when their spirits sag. Randy, hard, rapacious, bigoted, violent, revengeful, he is the essence of frontier humorist with a dash of Lyndon Johnson and the Texas of Mailer's *Why We Are in Vietnam.* When he passes into the souls of his chosen political heirs, they absorb his manifest unpleasantness. Only the Phantom, felt but never seen, dares stand up to him, and the struggle between these two titanic powers locked in comic book contention is not decided until the public burning of the Rosenbergs. Will Nixon become Uncle Sam's annointed son and assume the presidency? Or is Uncle Sam too disgusted with his vacillating and pusillanimous servant who tries to be all things to all men? Only after Nixon is violently and redemptively sodomized by his angry but forgiving paterfamilias is doubt dispelled.

The Public Burning, among other things, is a study in the excremental grotesque and a jaundiced version of the Rosenberg case. It is history as "happening" with real performers drafted to act in a Coover Spectacular. Here is Ike looking like his Norman Rockwell portrait, blue eyes, sandy hair, the face America loves. He has reading problems and troubles with Mamie. He is the uncomplicated yet canny fellow who is only comfortable drinking and playing poker with his cronies and watching cowboy movies. And there is Nixon, lover of cottage cheese and ketchup, a caricature right out of a Herblock cartoon or *Mad* magazine. His eyebrows meet. He is afflicted with afternoon shadow. He is forever sweating and stinking. Yet Coover's

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Nixon, unlike any of the other characters in the novel, is examined in depth and not always unsympathetically. A sensitive and self-mortifying little man peeps out occasionally from under the hard mask. In his fantasies, he can identify with the Rosenbergs, for he too is an outsider trying to ingratiate himself with his tormentors. But he is also vindictive and cowardly, and his moments of insight about his superiors and inferiors and the shabby trial are followed by explosions of fatuity: dreams of converting America into a continental suburbia, visions of himself as an international hero. Coover, in complete command of Nixoniana and committed to smashing Nixon to smithereens, will finally not concede his humanity even though it is sometimes hard to distinguish Nixon's voice from his own. As for the Jewish couple whose trial bedevils Nixon's inner life as it advances his political fortunes, Coover is hardly the ardent advocate. He sees them as dreary innocents, decent enough and poignant but middlebrow in their tastes and not very smart. Their guilt or innocence is of less consequence to him than the mania of their traducers.

To convey the flavor of the Cold War era, Coover floods his novel with topical allusions both familiar and esoteric and like Doctorow counts on the pleasure his readers may derive from identifying such *Zeitgeist* indicators as Bobo Olson, Christine Jorgenson, Luke Appling, Clark Kent, Bojangles Robinson, Johnny Mack Brown, Martha Raye, Irving Saypol, James Hagerty, Young Widow Brown, Punjab, David Greenglass, Dick Button, Lionel Stander, Dale Carnegie, and James Montgomery Flagg. He revives hoary political jokes and ransacks newspapers, literary texts, songs—more than a decade of popular culture—for tags to authenticate his assault against a squalid and haunted society. The Great American Joke, reiterated in Coover's clever parodies of radio entertainment, hangs on variations of the failure of potency. Uncle Sam's humor is crude and brutal, because crudity reminds Americans of the good old days when Columbia was full of piss and vinegar and answered her critics with a sock on the jaw.

A hodgepodge of names and songs and allusions to forgotten incidents may provoke nostalgic recollection, but the denseness and fluidity of the past are not recaptured through necrologies. Coover is a dazzling performer, witty, inventive, intelligent, and his novel is full of powerful moments: the scene, for example, in which a crowd tumbles out of a three-dimensional horror film into an equally phantasmagorical Times Square. I take it that the burning of the Rosenbergs is intended to represent only one fantastic chapter in the fantasy of history, that like the movie crowd we awaken from our private

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nightmares into the nightmare of history. The idea if not new is brilliantly objectified.

Yet for all his dogged research and literary gifts, his fantasy of national convulsion is a waste of talent. Even serious parody cannot be sustained for over 500 pages. The Rosenberg case plainly told is horrific enough without the garnishing of an obscene pseudohistorical Pageant of America. In *The Public Burning*, the impious entertainer crowds out the moralist. And whereas Coover the moralist sees all the sins of America reflected in the mirror of the Media, Coover the entertainer is unable to resist punning and quipping like mad and indulging in the kinds of verbal gymnastics typical of the Luce publications he is ostensibly scourging. He turns into a bore.

The example of Coover prompts the melancholy thought that even angry oppositionists, like the musical purist who finds to his disgust that he's been humming some noxious commercial jingle, are infested by the culture they execrate. What is more, they seek reassurance from it and inadvertently become collaborators. Gore Vidal once wrote that American writers today are power obsessed and that in a society without a "moral, political, and religious center," there is a tremendous temptation "to fill in the void" with one's presence and to achieve a "crude celebrity." To write a merely "excellent" novel, intellectually and aesthetically satisfying, is of no consequence to Demos, "indifferent to literature" and only reachable "by phenomena, by superior pornographies, or meretriciously detailed accounts of the way we live now." As an example, Vidal cited Norman Mailer, an honorable artist, who finding his best work ignored by a thick-witted public and "unduly eager for fame," clowned for attention. This judgment, made before *The Armies of the Night* appeared, is even more applicable to a number of Mailer's less remarkable contemporaries who in their quest of a larger readership turn mystagogues and allow their ideas, in T.S. Eliot's disparaging words, "to run wild and pasture in the emotions."

For such writers, history as conceived of in the recent "docudramas" offers a splendid way to attract popular notice. We live at a time when real events are hardly distinguishable from imaginary or "pseudo" ones. Movies and TV films not only seem to provide the scenarios for actual deeds of violence and crime (terrorists hijack a plane carrying among other passengers a troop of beauty queens) but also dictate the behavior of criminal and victim. Plots of everyday dramas reported in the press grow increasingly improbable and melodramatic. A rich Texan is believed to have arranged the execution of

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his son-in-law, the latter himself suspected of murdering his wife, the Texan's socialite daughter. The case inspires a book arguing the culpability of the father, and he in turn sues the publisher and author. Meanwhile the book has been sold to the films, and when a famous director arrives to observe the trial, accusers and accused respond histrionically to his presence and play their assigned roles like professional actors. It is almost as if the movie scene has become the reality, as if the Texas story or the one about the mother convicted of killing her two children (the subject of two books) or the exploits of the "Son of Sam" are not really graspable until translated into Media language.

Philip Roth, the novelist, expressed this idea some years ago in a much quoted passage. The modern writer, Roth said, "has his hands full in trying to understand and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is a kind of embarrassment to one's imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." Perhaps this sense of monstrous quotidian "actuality" accounts for his own sometimes amusing but heavy-handed parody, *Our Gang* (1971), in which President Trick E. Dixon and his White House entourage blather over the abominations they have promoted. Starting with the premises of the Nixon administration, Roth manufactures an extended black joke almost as grotesque as Coover's. His imaginary situations—a massacre of the Boy Scouts, an invasion of Denmark (pornographic center of the world), exposure of plotters—are hardly less fantastic than the stories pouring out of the Media to an audience conditioned to regard history, past and present, as lurid entertainment made up largely of plots and conspiracies.

The conspiracy theme has a long history in America. Charges of subversion have been used with good effect against Masons, abolitionists, Catholics, Negroes, Jews, Communists, Fascists, and capitalists. It is particularly compelling for temperaments impatient with complexity and receptive to cut-and-dried polarities. In this time of foreign and domestic machinations, the conspiracy obsession gathers strength and quickens imagination. J.F.K. and Martin Luther King were obviously the victims of plotters, and literary sleuths have demonstrated how insiders did in Abe Lincoln. But why stop there? The Garfield business looks pretty fishy ("disappointed office seeker" indeed!) and don't tell us that Leon Czolgosz pulled off the McKinley caper by himself. To American Manichaeans, irrespective of class, the Kingdoms of Light and Dark that President Eisenhower held forth on in Coover's novel

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have been contending since the Pilgrims landed. The Devil foments mischief in literal or metaphysical hideouts, and Mr. Big, his protean American agent who figures so prominently in crime fiction, orchestrates the shenanigans of the "Interests" and the Mafia and the C.I.A.

"The situation of our time," W.H. Auden wrote, "surrounds us like a baffling crime," and the resourceful practitioners of novelized history find "private faces in public places" less inviting "than public faces in private places." By converting recent enormities into fiction and capitalizing on the conspiracy motif, these writers stand not only to increase the sale of their wares but also to revenge themselves against a society hungry for personalities and indifferent to all but "relevant" subjects. The demolition of Richard Nixon is one of those subjects, the story of the fall of a tinhorn Cataline from high place that ends not in tragedy, not even in pathos, but in bathos. It evokes no somber reflections. The groundlings pelt the ousted trickster with garbage. "Quick comedians" mock his speech and gestures and convey his heinousness through parody. How seriously the parodists take themselves it is hard to say, since they can either claim or disclaim a moral burden in their spoofs. Do they see themselves as the unacknowledged interpreters of events if not the legislators of mankind? Do they believe that their x-ray vision really does disclose the cancer in the body politic?

It has often been asserted that the serious writer with "tyrannous eye" and sense of felt life is better equipped than historians to explore the "hidden corridors" of history. Unbaffled by the plethora of facts which inhibit the historian who must eliminate to see, he is ostensibly endowed with the power to detect designs and read meanings in the contemporary flux. But what happens to the "antennae of the race" when current reality embarrasses the literary imagination and the balked writer can no longer distinguish the real from the meretricious and the fake, when the fictional historians of our "low dishonest" decades have to compete with unfrocked politicians, ex-White House aides, newspaper reporters, and former undercover personnel—not the most clairvoyant elucidators of the postwar years?

The inventive fantasies of Doctorow, Coover, and company are denser but not intrinsically more interesting than the self-justifying ones of Spiro Agnew, E. Howard Hunt, William Safire, John Dean, and John Erhlichman. Both groups compound the contemporary confusion or grossly simplify it. The Washington based novels may be nothing more than *romans à clef*, packages of vendible gossip that enable their authors to cash in on their exposures to power in high

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places. They may have little literary substance. Yet they possess the kind of verisimilitude to be found in some of the popular "docudramas" and the film variations on the theme of Watergate into which they are so readily convertible. Novelized histories are less adaptable to the media, but perhaps they have a value other than their literary merits. Treated as artifacts, they might conceivably offer some clues to the historian or novelist of the future seeking to fathom a type of sensibility (circa 1975) for whom American history was camp or junk and pertinent only in so far as it lent itself to farce or traced the course of national degradation.

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Jorge Edwards

SURVIVING IN CHILE

With my forehead pressed against the tiny window of the airplane and my mouth hanging open, I was puzzled by my awareness of great space. Without realizing it, I had grown accustomed to the European anthill, to the Catalan coast invaded by the Germans and the Dutch at the rate of one ruddy, robust body per square yard. Now, after flying over the Argentine pampas for two hours, I saw the broad salt flats and the first wrinkles of the Andes as the exact opposite of the European coast: as a deserted planet where nature had seemingly devoured the frame of society and transformed it into a silent, indifferent, lunar landscape. We flew over the mountain range, hidden beneath a roof of clouds resembling a dense sea, and then our plane immediately dropped toward the valleys of Central Chile, green and dark in the depths of the Southern Hemisphere's winter.

After the coup of 1973, I had lost all the privileges of a diplomatic career and, besides, Chilean papers had lost their former good reputation, so each time I cross a border I do so with a certain uneasiness, as though I might be found guilty of some infraction that I'm unaware of. The feeling is, I suppose, what specialists call paranoia and I've come to the conclusion that paranoia, or at least something very much like it, has become a natural state for many Chileans, for the majority of Chileans. Still, from the plane's ramp, I saw the idlers lined up on the observation decks of the small building at Pudahuel Airport, and I had the strange feeling that they were the same ones I'd seen there in July of 1971 when I took my last trip. I have to say, though, that my uneasiness at crossing this new border didn't last very long: the police stamped my passport without asking any questions and a customs inspector waved me through without opening my baggage. Previously, I'd been told, there had been many soldiers with machine guns to be seen. That phase now belonged to the past and the Junta was striving to create an external image of calm, of recovered normalcy. "Normalization," a term applicable with a curious symmetry to both Prague and Santiago, was not the only perverse relation deducible from the cases of Czecho-

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slovakia and Chile. In both countries there had been a political spring, euphoric and, for many, illusory; in both countries, it had been crushed with tanks.

The influence of Europe had distorted my view and made me forget the impossibly squat architecture of downtown Santiago, with its startling anarchy of styles, its walls the color of soot or smoke, towers of fake Gothic rubblework, and neoclassical columns sometimes plastered over with huge posters announcing sales of mattresses or shoes at unbeatable prices. There, in the same spot as always, stood the building where the poet Vicente Huidobro had lived, a building designed along avant-garde lines produced by a remote influence of the Bauhaus group; and there, too, was Echaurren, the somnambulant street of a poem from my old days, evoking the Basque names, which began dominating Chilean society in the eighteenth century.

There had been a lot of shooting here, they told me, pointing to a tall, pock-marked telecommunications tower in the center of the city. No doubt about it: an ideal spot for snipers. Yet from the moment of my arrival I verified that the military—convinced of at least some correspondence between the Left's verbal violence during the Allende years and its actual striking power—had prepared for a brief civil war only to find itself, at the end of forty-eight hours, fighting a phantom enemy. This did not stop them from launching ferocious attacks against that tattered, unarmed phantom. Anticommunism, as well, had been transformed into paranoia, into a delirium that sometimes spoke of international crusades against political perversion in the world. I think my trip coincided with a period when the country was slowly beginning to recuperate from its illness. Some people rubbed their eyes and realized that the current reality was different, that they had been submerged in a nightmare.

Something I was forced to realize, prompted by memory, was that all the campaign propaganda had disappeared. In my time, the posters, painted slogans, and strings of letters stretching between lampposts had been piled on top of each other along the walls and streets like geological strata. Digging through the layers permitted you to uncover recent political history. Often a decaying poster picturing a somewhat younger Allende from the '64 campaign could be discovered beneath the posters from the '70 campaign, while under them remained the tar from the posters of '58. Not only had the military cleared out the communists and every kind of leftist, they had also proceeded to clear away all their outer signs as well. "How clean Santiago is!" exclaimed several women with pleasure and, for a moment, like apparitions from

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hell, the demonstrators with raised fists marching through the streets, the insolent slogans, the police sirens, and the explosion of tear gas bombs all passed before their eyes. Upholders of family order, these women wanted the military to stay forever. They had even developed a taste for parades and impeccable uniforms, which after September of 1973 seemed newer and cleaner than ever. But in the outer chambers of an opposition lawyer, I also saw the women with worn-out faces, sunken eyes, and a dark, hard look who wander in search of their *desaparecidos*: vanished husbands, brothers, and children. These two groups of women lived in irreconcilable worlds. And yet, in spite of everything, I surmised that Chile was beginning to emerge from its absolute polarization. In spite of everything, critical, lucid people who had known the concentration camps were putting their bitterness behind them; members of the old parliamentary Right were thinking about the need to return to a political democracy.

The closer you get to the mountains, the more the city loses its sooty, smoky, dusty color and becomes pleasant, transparent, with streets vaulted by the leafy crowns of trees and with the snow of the mountains almost at arm's length. In these sections of the city it seems that nothing has happened—ever. In some there is even the feeling of a clean and prosperous city in the provincial U.S.: lighted signs, new supermarkets, an ice-skating rink, a large bowling alley. In contrast to Prague's, the style of Santiago's normalization depends visibly on a different economic and political world. "The stores carry everything now," the men from the outskirts of town near the slopes say, happy with life: British cookies, French delicacies, Brazilian, Argentine, Scotch, Canadian whiskey. Who buys all this, I asked myself, when the salary of a public employee scarcely stretches far enough for food, and that's not saying anything about blue collar salaries, or counting the fifteen to twenty percent unemployment rate. But new faces have appeared in these neighborhoods, new people: men wearing flashy silk shirts, sporting big Japanese watches, driving long cars, and these people, I imagine, form the clientele for those establishments. This is the "American way of life" in its peripheral version, and Dr. Milton Friedman, Nobel Prize winner in economics as well as leader of the so-called Chicago School, has stated that he does not approve of the Junta's political methods, but that its economic orientation is correct. Those industries not on a competitive basis with respect to the rest of the world will disappear and Chile, through free exchange, will be integrated into the economic system of the West, into the kingdom of the product, will be converted, I imagine, into a second-class consumer society.

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There was a curious contrast between these men with their chrome-trimmed cars—forerunners of a society of test tubes and electronic products—and some of the people from the past, such as ex-ambassadors, ex-ministers, ex-parliament members, who had not known how to adapt themselves to the new realities. Some had held on to their old mansions, while last year's wardrobe still allowed them to walk downtown streets dressed in conservative, dark blue, double-breasted suits and shiny shoes; but their pensions, eaten away by inflation, allowed them to eat nothing but *pancutas*, the saddest of native stews, made from lumps of dough cooked in water. In this regard, I asked an old parliamentarian from what might be called the center Left: "Why don't you sell your house? You could live very well in a small apartment." He lowered his voice: "Because it's swank," he said, "and you've got to keep up appearances." I'd always thought of "swank"—an expression that partly equates with vulgarity, partly with social climbing in stratified, hierarchical societies—as a category that had been eclipsed years ago. But many social phenomena that seemed extinct have been resurrected in Chile, or, better said, have shown that they had always been there, crouched behind the stage sets constructed first by the Revolution and later by the Counter-revolution. And yet, restoring the old order was merely a caricature of the past, a disturbing parody.

At even two or three kilometers from the coast, you can smell the sharp tang of the Pacific, christened by its discoverer, Magellan, on one of its rare calm days. Near Isla Negra the mighty waves crash one after another close to the shore in great charges of foam, striking against the rocks, leaping high and disintegrating into the air. All the wintry coast, the pine groves, red earth, and sand seem to be dominated by the splashing, by the explosion of the waves, and the piercing odor of the sea. Pablo Neruda's house on Isla Negra survives entirely shut up, in mourning, with a ghostly presence. I had been the poet's neighbor for many years and I can see myself hoisting the flag indicating that he was in residence, talking on the stone bench near the ship's figurehead and the mossy, half-buried anchor, drinking from huge goblets at the bar where a mobile of moving eyes hung from the ceiling, each of whose beams had been carved with the name of one of his *desaparecido* friends: García Lorca, Ratón Agudo, Rojas Jiménez, Rubén Azocar, Paul Eluard. . . . At the inn, Señora Elena, the same as ever, kept her post under a framed article in which Pablo had bid farewell to her dead husband: "Black Handkerchiefs for Don Jaime." According to what Pablo wrote, Don Jaime had made a career of service to Arturo Allessandri Palma, two-time president of the republic and founder of a

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rightest political dynasty. But Pablo cultivated a peaceful coexistence with the owners of the inn and he used to pass by in the afternoons to taste their wines, which continue to be excellent, especially when accompanied by a plate of enormous, succulent sea urchins. The bed of sea urchins stretches along the coast of Isla Negra (a coastal town that is not an island, as Neruda experts know) and still offers a very abundant catch, as if to show me, yet once again, nature's indifference to history. Señora Elena told me that Rafita, Neruda's carpenter—the poet had a mania for building endless additions to his houses—was living in his little house on the other side of the road, undoubtedly with less work than before.

In a wooden cabin among the pines at the base of a hill facing the sea lives Nicanor Parra. A very different poet from Neruda, Parra is less natural and torrential than the author of *Residence on Earth*, more incisive, abstract, and contradictory, as is suggested by the title of his most important work: *Poems and Antipoems*. With glass after glass of a coastal wine that is, as Chileans say, "chewable," Nicanor recounts his odyssey of the last few years to me: everything started with an unfortunate cup of tea at the White House, to which he was invited as a gesture of public relations with Latin American writers by Patricia Nixon. Since it was a matter, precisely, of public relations, the cup of tea received intense publicity and provoked furious attacks from Cuban writers, followed by the cancellation of an invitation from the Casa de las Américas in Havana. Then during the Unidad Popular, the young Castroite Chileans, the neophytes of the Revolution, had to be more Catholic than the pope. "They came along and expelled me from the university," Nicanor says, with his slightly rasping voice and intense look, raising his hands emphatically. "They expelled you?" "They kicked me out!" Nicanor insists and later adds several unpleasant details related to that expulsion. That was the beginning of his being condemned, Nicanor comments: "I was already a dissident from the future Chilean socialism!"

Nasty rumors have it that Nicanor, resentful of the young guardians of revolutionary culture, was one of those who rejoiced at the military coup. They say he was seen eating ice cream with one of the intervening generals on a university patio. A little more than a year later, however, Nicanor wrote a work for presentation at La Carpa, a tent theater, and this work, *Leaves of Parra*, offered a bloody, merciless satire of the new regime established in Chile. They were able to put the work on for several days, amidst threats, jittery nerves, and municipal sanctions. "Once they closed down La Carpa because of a lack of

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hygienic facilities. All right, we installed hygienic facilities in less than twenty-four hours. Another time they cut off the lights. During those days when I had to devote myself to defending La Carpa, I couldn't read or write a single line." One night during the curfew hours, the tent was set afire by unknown culprits and Nicanor decided to seek refuge in exile at Isla Negra. He continues to offer several weekly classes at the university and recognizes that he can speak about anything he chooses. "What were your last classes on?" "On Fourier, the utopian socialist, and his classification of cuckolds," Nicanor answers. We decide to open another bottle of wine, in honor of Fourier, and we search through a thick volume of Rabelais for his advice to those he considered cuckolds by vocation. "I don't plan to move away from here," Nicanor says, perhaps feeling that the outside world has become excessively difficult for him after his recent personal and political upsets. In his coastal refuge he has read a great deal and filled innumerable notebooks with his poetry, evoking a character from our good days, a saintly man who preached at Santiago's Normal School (a kind of Chilean Hyde Park) and called himself the Christ of Elqui. Into this character's mouth, Nicanor has put in verse some paradoxes and truths that are not easy to express these days.

On the streets of Santiago and along the coastal roads the presence of the police did not seem excessive to me, in contrast to what they say about the first years after the coup. When I returned to Spain my Catalan barber gave me the best explanation: "Here, when anyone who moved was beaten, they didn't need so many police on the street; but now, with democracy and street demonstrations, you see much more of the police." It seemed to me that my friend the barber was partly right: after the first years of open repression in Chile, they can now afford the luxury of showing a little civic calm. In contrast to the past, the police squads, motorcycles, uniforms, and cars now looked very modern to me, impeccable, but their presence in the city was rather circumspect. The morning when Pinochet expelled General Leigh from the Junta, I noticed that my friends in the opposition took precautions, didn't talk on the telephone, or simply vanished into thin air. The streets remained quiet, without soldiers, but suddenly on going into the subway I had the impression that the calm had become spectral. Only the sound of footsteps could be heard in the silence, as if by instinct the people wanted to avoid commenting on the situation. At that time the press abstained from publishing the statements of Leigh or of his fellow officers in the Air Force. Nevertheless, for a Chilean who had lived in Franco's Spain, the press took surprising liberties. For exam-

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ple, it spoke of the strike in Chuquicamata by miners who had forced out the union leader with an overwhelming hiss of disapproval, and it reported details of the trial in connection with the assassination of Orlando Letelier that was going on in Washington. In huge headlines one magazine reprinted the statement to a U.S. federal judge by Michael Townley, the agent handed over to Washington by the Chilean government: "I was a DINA agent. They gave me a mission to carry out: assassinate Orlando Letelier." Meanwhile, the Jesuit magazine *Mensaje* came out with a terrifying account of the crimes and abuses of DINA, the secret police that Pinochet had found himself obliged to dissolve a year earlier.

On the morning of Leigh's fall, while I was walking in the heart of Santiago, an acquaintance of long standing said to me: "The man who holds the sword cuts the Gordian knots," and he blinked, shrugging, as if it were not necessary or prudent to add anything else. Well, the true Gordian knot of Chilean politics, during all this time, is the Letelier case, and the reaction it will finally have in the White House. They say, correctly, that the real statesmen are those who know exactly when to cut the Gordian knots; but it is not known how far President Carter wants to go, or what unexpected measures may be taken by the Chilean Junta, which up to now has weathered the storm with an obstinancy similar to Franco's during the forties—in a different world, however, and a different country and without the recent trauma of a genuine civil war. Still, the Letelier trial is the regime's ordeal by fire, and I for my part, after spending a month in Chile, have come to the conclusion that it's best to refrain from making political prophecies.

Translated by Gregory Kolovakos and Ronald Christ

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Robert J. Seidman

THE POLITICS OF ART IN RUSSIA: AN INTERVIEW WITH ERNST NEIZVESTNY

Abstract art had not been seen in the Soviet Union for thirty years when the Soviet sculptor Ernst Neizvestny and a Moscow art instructor named Bilyutin organized the first nonconformist art exhibition in 1962.

The exhibition opened and caused a sensation. Enormous excited crowds attended; the queues surpassed everybody's expectations. After a few days the exhibition was abruptly closed down and the artists were ordered to move their works to the Manège building, an old riding stable next to the Kremlin.

The next morning an entourage of about seventy men entered the building. Heading the group was the premier himself. Khrushchev had no sooner reached the top of the stairs than he began to shout: "Dog shit! Filth! Disgrace! Who is responsible for this? Who is the leader?"

Bilyutin responded, but a government functionary said: "He's not the real leader. We don't want him. That's the real leader!" and pointed at Neizvestny.

Khrushchev continued to shout. But this time Neizvestny shouted back: "You may be premier and chairman but not here in front of my works. Here I am premier and we shall discuss as equals."

A minister responded: "Who are you talking to? This is the prime minister. As for you, we are going to have you sent to the uranium mines."

Two security men seized Neizvestny's arms. He ignored the minister and spoke straight to Khrushchev: "You are talking to a man who is perfectly capable of killing himself at any moment. Your threats mean nothing to me."

The formality of the statement made it entirely convincing. At a sign from the minister, the security men released Neizvestny's arms. Neizvestny turned his back on the crowd and began to walk towards his works. He continued to walk slowly, straining his ears. The entire hall was absolutely silent. At last he heard heavy slow breathing behind him. Khrushchev was following.

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The two men argued heatedly about the works on view until a functionary accused Neizvestny of being a homosexual. Neizvestny answered: "In such matters, Nikita Sergeyevich, it is awkward to bear testimony on one's behalf. But if you could find a girl here and now—I think I should be able to show you."

Khrushchev was heartily amused. They continued to argue, but the tension was broken. Thus, the story of Neizvestny's courage and integrity; in Neizvestny's view, nonconformist art gained backhand official recognition.

The most complete account of Neizvestny's confrontation with Khrushchev, which I have paraphrased here, occurs in John Berger's excellent book on Ernst Neizvestny, *Art and Revolution* (Pantheon). In our interviews Neizvestny confirmed the accuracy of Berger's description. Anyone interested in Neizvestny and the problems of art in the Soviet Union should obtain a copy of this book. In *The Yawning Heights* (Random House), Alexander Zinoviev's extraordinary amalgam of novel, memoir, and anatomy of life in Russia, Neizvestny is the book's only hero.

Known most widely in the West as the man who stood up to Khrushchev, Ernst Neizvestny was the Soviet Union's foremost sculptor. In spite of official reluctance to admit his artistic existence, Neizvestny won an anonymous competition to design a large frieze for the Aswan Dam. At the Moscow Institute of Technology, he and one assistant constructed a frieze of 907 meters, the world's largest. In 1974, twelve years after his celebrated meeting with Khrushchev and three years after the former premier's death, Neizvestny's memorial to Khrushchev was unveiled by Khrushchev's son Sergei. A year later Neizvestny turned down an official request to do a bust of Brezhnev.

In recent years his work has become internationally known and exhibited. In 1974, Neizvestny had a one-man exhibition at the New York Cultural Center, and recently he completed a bust of Dmitry Shostakovitch for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. In 1975 he publicly announced that the Soviet authorities had blocked his fifty-six requests to travel abroad in response to professional invitations. In retaliation, the Soviet authorities deprived Neizvestny of his studio. He then requested an exit visa, a one-way ticket out of Russia.

Today Neizvestny is living in New York, working in a Soho studio. He has begun life all over again. When I asked him what he lost when he left Russia, Neizvestny replied: "Everything." He left his home, his wife and daughter, the bulk of his life's work—including 800 bronzes—his friends, and his acknowledged position as leader of nonconformist art in the Soviet Union.

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Neizvestny is a sturdy broad figure, with the forearms and chest of a wrestler. His air of intense energy suggests a Jacob grappling with spiritual and material challenges. His very large, deep brown eyes are informed by intelligence and a certain wariness. Tightly cropped hair grips his head like a skullcap. The hands are expressive, with blunt, wide fingers that are continually moving, shaping, directing. He combines urbanity with candor and passion; he is formal and tactful, a man not easily sidetracked. The subtlety of his thought and expression survives the considerable perils of translation.

Like all social systems, the Soviet Union's is compounded of long-established customs and accords which are difficult for the outsider to understand. As an artist condemned by officialdom, Ernst Neizvestny had to be an expert interpreter and manipulator of these legal and extralegal procedures. In our two interviews, Neizvestny supplied a picture of an extremely formal society in which protocol often has the force of law. The fact that Khrushchev visited the nonconformist art exhibition in Moscow in 1962 conferred official status on nonconformist art. Thus the failure of Shelepin, head of the Committee on State Security (K.G.B.), to turn up evidence of wrongdoing on Neizvestny's part in obtaining materials for his sculpture prompted a written note of apology from the minister.

Robert J. Seidman: What was the nature of your formal training in art?

Ernst Neizvestny: I graduated from the Academy of Arts, the Surikov Institute. Before the war I studied at a school for talented children in Leningrad.

RS: During your formal art training, did you have any teachers whom you admired?

EN: It is only now that I can say that there were teachers to whom I am grateful. In general, I was a good student. But while I was studying, internally, I was in opposition to the school. And my opposition became manifest right after I finished my schooling, for then I started doing work that was not Social Realist.

RS: With regard to the Academy of Arts itself, was it specifically Socialist Realist or were any other artistic traditions taught?

EN: Inside the Social Realist school we were well trained in all the classical subjects of art—anatomy, perspective, and drawing. This is precisely why I am grateful to my teachers now, because I have had an excellent classical training. But the school's weakpoint was that it gave no freedom to one's personality and imagination. That is why

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the school had a deadening effect on weak people; most of the students became artisans, amateurs, not artists. But strong people with a solid academic base could move further ahead. [In general, Neizvestny continued, he considers the Russian avant-garde art movement to be his spiritual teacher, artists like Kandinsky, Malevich, and especially Tatlin, the schools of the suprematists, futurists, and constructivists.]

RS: When you were in art school, was it possible for you to see the works of the Russian avant-garde?

EN: In the art school, their works were forbidden. Those were condemned artists. But I studied a lot by myself. I learned about the school.

RS: How did you get access to their work?

EN: In the first place, there were books. Also, in the storage rooms of museums—if you wanted to look very much, you could see their work. Yet why do I not directly follow the Russian constructivists and the avant-garde? Basically, the existential problems of a contemporary artist differ from those of the avant-garde. Practically, I want to join the two trends of Russian art, the Russian religious/philosophical school, the central figure of which is man.

RS: You say you saw Russian avant-garde art in the storage rooms of museums. Could the curators have gotten into trouble for showing the work?

EN: Yes, certainly. It was quite secret.

RS: What accounts for the extraordinary flowering of Russian art in the late teens and early twenties?

EN: I think that this flowering did not begin in the twenties. It began during the Russian Renaissance, before the Revolution, but it became very manifest during the Revolution. Then it was driven underground. These were excellent artists, but their tragedy was not just their personal loss during Stalin's dictatorship. It was just that the people were not prepared to understand that kind of art. This ignorance was exploited by Stalin.

RS: The Russian people couldn't understand the simplicity and power of the graphics of Lissitzky, Malevich, Tatlin?

EN: The scheme is really very simple. The people made the Revolution to have a better life. And the people were not acquainted with the intellectual, aristocratic forms of art. They knew the middle forms of the merchants' art [what Neizvestny calls "art of the marketplace"], which is really official middle-class art. When the people became the masters, they wanted what they considered a good art, that is, a middle-class art. They considered all other art to be a fake because

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they could not understand it. What they wanted was art in gilded frames.

RS: It always seemed to me that the struggle of Lissitzky and Malevich was to translate those aristocratic forms into something accessible and popular.

EN: Essentially, of course, they are popular artists. For example, when Meyerhold made his plays in keeping with the art of the marketplace, the Party engaged representatives of officialdom from the people. And they said, "What kind of theatre is this? It's exactly like the dance in our village. True theatre is rich decorations, ballerinas; it's a big theatre. Why don't we have decorations? There is nothing beautiful here. That's the kind of thing we have in our village, so why do we have to pay money for it?"

RS: Did you have any official friends or allies at any point during your life in the Soviet Union?

EN: Not a single official artist was my ally.

RS: What about government officials? Any allies among them?

EN: Yes, I had very good friends at the very top of Russian officialdom. Both Hedrick Smith (*The Russians*) and Robert Kaiser (*Russia*) in their books mentioned that they visited very high officials and saw my work at these places. Why did this happen? There are several reasons. The first is snobbery. Also a wish to communicate with foreigners and be like Europeans.

RS: What is the Soviet public's attitude toward visual art and toward sculpture in particular?

EN: If we are talking about the public as organized by the government, then in Russia, in the hierarchy of the arts, sculpture is the most politicized and ideologized. Why? Because in my country sculpture is considered to be monuments to leaders and heroes or to the ideas to which they gave birth. Therefore, even within sculpture a hierarchy exists. For example, a monument to Marx is *by definition* the most beautiful and excellent because it is the most important. In Russia, a concept like this exists. This work is headed for a Lenin prize. This may be said even before it is known how the sculptor has executed the given work. Why? Because a monument to Marx will reveal the most highly developed political personality. And in this connection we can say a work is good not in regard to how it is done but in regard to who is looking at it.

RS: How does an artist respond to these conditions, to this hierarchy?

EN: An official artist attempts to get the most respectable commissions since that makes him the most highly paid and the most prestigious.

RS: What if an unofficial artist constructs a monument to Marx?

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EN: If he does this he's already official.

RS: How did you sell your work abroad?

EN: I was one of the initiators of the Salon for the Sale of Art Objects. In principle, the salon was created in order to receive hard currency. But the trade organization ran up against ideology and, in essence, the same conservatives [as those who run the Academy of Fine Arts and the Union of Artists] gained power there and set up a veto. Thus, the international salon was transformed into an ideological body, not an institution for free trade. Therefore, though I had more commissions than anybody else, I sold less than anybody else. When people from the West made agreements with me for a large sum, the Artistic Council protested and specified a lesser sum despite the wishes of the trade organization which wanted to get more hard currency. This was done so that I did not become a factory of hard currency, hard currency which was indispensable to the government.

RS: Does Socialist Realism exist, and in what way is it meaningful to the Soviet public?

EN: I must say there is an excellent study by Siniavsky, *What is Socialist Realism*?. But this study is an ironic dream of a Soviet functionary. Perhaps under Stalin, elements of such a Socialist Realism did exist. But in reality Socialist Realism doesn't exist; instead there is conformity. To be a Socialist Realist is to be like everybody else. Therefore, Socialist Realism can change but in the direction of general stylistic features. Gradually Socialist Realism begins to take in elements of Western art forms as well, but, as a rule, not of personality but of general features, the worst and most banal features of various international salons because any kind of personalism is inimical. It is possible to take this thought to the point of absurdity when all Socialist Realists will become banal modernists. At that point an excellent realist will be labelled a bourgeois bastard, bastard in the sense of illegitimate.

RS: This is a trifle flip, but it must be terribly boring for Socialist Realist artists.

EN: Everybody is bored: those who put in the orders, those who execute them, and those who have to look at them. Boredom is a form of patriotism.

RS: In his book *Art and Revolution,* John Berger contends that the Soviets regard their artists as prophets and themselves as "subjects of prophecy." Do you agree? If so, what special significance does art have in the Soviet Union? And how does this relate to the concept of official art?

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EN: Before the Revolution the following situation existed: the major writers who were confronted with many problems—social problems, ethical ones, metaphysical ones—came to the conclusion that something was wrong with society. And this was not connected to the wide mass of civilization in Russia, but with a narrow level of culture. Therefore, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky or others could not simply remain professional writers in the way that, say, Flaubert or the Goncourt brothers could. They had to create a micro-aesthetics, a micro-ethics, micro-religion. They became not merely professionals but in a certain definite sense prophets. This is the structure, and the structure was also preserved after the Revolution. Therefore, the State and the Party relate to artists not only as people who are creating beauty but as preachers of party ideas. And the people also began to relate to them in a similar fashion. In certain individual cases so does the artist.

RS: Inequities and social problems were widespread everywhere in the late nineteenth century. Why did this particular tradition develop in Russia?

EN: Because in Russia, both in the past and now, there are no pluralistic social institutions, and therefore the artist takes these problems on himself.

RS: In the USSR you were officially condemned a number of times and in a variety of official terms. What was your artistic and personal reaction to being described a "nihilist," "decadent," "unpatriotic"? Did you feel you ever were any of these things?

EN: In our country terminology doesn't have any significance because the official terminology isn't concerned with the adequacy of its concepts. An example: when I was talking in front of the entire Politburo and arguing, in particular, with Ilichev, the head of Soviet ideology, I said, "Alright, you call me an abstractionist. I am not an abstractionist though elements of abstract art do enter into my creative work. Let's assume you don't understand this. But in your report Heinrich Böll was called an abstractionist. This is absolutely absurd.

And he answered me, "You're a very intelligent person, Neizvestny. You really don't understand what's up?" I understood. They had given me a provocative question because at that time the word abstractionist was their term for the concept "bad."

RS: Why did this interview with the Politburo take place?

EN: Because I had continually and publicly announced protests against the situation connected with Soviet culture. Therefore, over

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the years, people quarreled with me, chatted with me, threatened me, tried to buy me, and so forth.

RS: Did this first confrontation take place in 1962?

EN: The confrontation (with the head of Soviet ideology and the Politburo) took place in 1962. But the first confrontation occurred right after I graduated from the Institute. It was in 1955, while Stalin was still alive. I had done several works which were different from Socialist Realism. In 1955, after the Hungarian events—the press picked this up—I was officially accused of being the head of all Soviet revisionism. My meeting with Khrushchev is not the beginning but the end, since the world found out about this in 1962.

RS: Do you consider yourself a rebel?

EN: I do not consider myself a rebel, but I consider myself a personalist. Therefore I was perceived as a rebel.

RS: During your days of official disapproval, when you were being harrassed by the authorities, how did you support yourself?

EN: For two years I worked as a simple worker at a plant. And for ten years I made my living as a worker, a bricklayer, a longshoreman. Sometimes I worked helping official artists'to do their work and got a commission for it.

RS: So you actually produced some official artists' work for them?

EN: Yes, I produced for them and they paid me a commission.

RS: How did you get your materials, your metal?

EN: Since getting materials is a State matter, I was forced to infringe on Soviet law in order to work. I really got them on the black market but always in such a way that I couldn't be accused formally. The head of the K.G.B., Shelepin, tried to accuse me criminally, but, after finishing his two-year investigation, he was forced to apologize to me. I managed to get around the law so subtly that it was impossible to accuse me directly of a crime.

RS: The existence of the black market and the way in which you were able to get your materials suggest the existence of a community of some kind.

EN: In a certain sense, yes. This is an economic problem. Together with official economics there is unofficial economics, which manages to make up for the insufficiencies of official economics. This is simply life itself.

RS: You say that there were those who voiced total disapproval of your work and those who were unswerving apologists for it. But an artist needs aesthetic criticism. How was this generated or was it limited to self-criticism?

EN: A group of friends of mine and I created a particular type of

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culture which I could call "of the catacombs." What do I mean by this? The concept of samizdat [works banned or that cannot be published in the USSR that are circulated in manuscript] makes itself felt as a purely political phenomenon. And at the same time this isn't literally true. And within my circle were people of the most varied professions: mathematical logicians, Marxist philosophers, sociologists, metaphysical philosophers, poets, semioticians, topologists, and so on. All of my activity was really of a samizdat nature because I fulfilled their spiritual needs in sculpture and they fulfilled my spiritual needs in other fields. It was an exchange for us.

RS: How is the official art world structured?

EN: There is a single customer, and that is the State. This customer operates through three channels. One, some works are bought by the Ministry of Culture, which creates orders for monumental works. The Ministry of Culture is the most generous patron, paying the artist the largest commissions. Two, the Artists' Union is the second highest paying patron. Three, then there are a number of small, provincial artists' unions. They pay the least.

RS: The Artists' Union commissions its members to do work for itself?

EN: Yes, engaged members are commissioned.

RS: The Academy of Fine Arts is made up of roughly thirty members and has been described as the more conservative of the two official Russian artist organizations. The Union of Artists is considerably larger (the Moscow branch has approximately 1000 members). What do these organizations do? Why did both organizations view your work as a threat?

EN: Our Academy is the most conservative organ because it is the purest ideological center. The Academy is not the center and guardian of accumulated cultural values as, say, an Academy might be in Europe. The Union of Artists is indistinguishable from the Academy, but because of its larger membership there is some greater amplitude for individuality. Formally, therefore, it may be considered the more liberal.

RS: Were there any other visual artists in your "catacomb" group?

EN: I was the leader of a circle of visual artists. And gradually these artists became quite independent of me—artists like Kabakov, a Russian conceptualist, like Yankelevsky, Soltzer, Sobolev. After that I had a big school of sorts, made up entirely of young people.

RS: These were apprentices and students?

EN: Yes, apprentices and assistants. And now many of those people have become independent.

RS: Did you do any formal teaching?

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EN: No. But unofficially I had a school. This school functioned not on the lines of the academy, but rather as in the Middle Ages or in the Renaissance when there was the institution of the artist's studio in the center of which stood the Master and ringed around him were his apprentices. His apprentices were not only artists but also artisans in art. According to the rules of my school, each student had some trade.

RS: Are there any groups among "unofficial" artists who form a distinct aesthetic or stylistic school as say the abstract expressionists formed in the U.S. in the forties and fifties?

EN: Yes, there are Abstractionists, Conceptualists, and there are visual forms like Op Art, Pop Art, etc.

RS: Were you in touch with dissident writers and scientists who are known in the West—Sakharov, Medvedev, Solzhenitsyn—while in the USSR?

EN: Yes, of course.

RS: What do you think of Solzhenitsyn's political views?

EN: An attitude toward Solzhenitsyn should be divided into two parts. In everything that concerns his experience of life within the Soviet Union, he is absolutely right. In regard to his analysis of Western ways of life, I do not believe that Solzhenitsyn is a very good analyst. For example, let's examine the Harvard speech, which I don't want to talk about very much. I can only say that this speech could be delivered publicly only with thanks to those same social institutions of which Solzhenitsyn is so critical.

RS: Is there a private market for art in the Soviet Union, specifically for dissident art? A man like Glezer, what is his role? How are paintings sold internally, those not sold to the State, museums, the Artists' Unions?

EN: Dissident art cannot be sold to museums. There is only a very small private market within the USSR. As far as Glezer is concerned, he did not buy art. He got those works as presents from the artists. The artists were interested in having their works catalogued and preserved. Some foreigners buy some of these works. But this has been both for better and worse, because some people who come from abroad buy Russian exotic paintings.

RS: Well that's true everywhere. Often galleries handle the exotic, that's always a market kind of problem, isn't it?

EN: So this is how a small market of pseudo-Russian art has developed, largely because of the pressure of foreigners. This painting imitates the ikon painting, the church art, and this is the art of the Russian souvenir for a not very intelligent buyer.

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RS: But Glezer's collection is better than that. It contains contemporary work.

EN: Differently. I don't think that Glezer intends to select the best of Russian painting; he shows what there is.

RS: How does someone like Glezer support himself in the Soviet Union?

EN: Glezer has been a translator of the Georgian language.

RS: Are there others who play a similar role to Glezer's? Is there anyone else who supports the unofficial artist?

EN: Yes, there are some who have come into existence recently. In the first place, there is Kostakis, who has gathered a remarkably precious collection.

RS: Your feeling is that the quality of Kostakis's collection is better than that of Glezer's?

EN: Yes, Kostakis is a professional, an experienced professional. I have not cooperated with Kostakis personally because Kostakis paid very little to the artist and by that time I was receiving more than he paid. But Kostakis did buy several works from me.

RS: Do you have any feelings about the quality of the unofficial art in Russia?

EN: Yes, in Soviet art there are a lot of unofficial artists who are low-skilled professionals from my point of view. That's a problem of talent. Of course there are very good artists too. To speak of the human aspect, all the unofficial artists in the Soviet Union are heroes. Because any artist, even a bad artist, can earn his living in the USSR, because he is provided for by the State. If an artist denounces the official line—I do not mean that all those people should necessarily be considered good artists—yet all the same they are doing existentially heroic deeds. When these people are inside the Soviet Union, we must respect them even if we don't like them as artists. But when they come to the West, that's another problem.

RS: How was the first unofficial art exhibition in 1962 organized?

EN: The Moscow City Soviet organized the exhibition officially through Bilyutin. I met with the leader of the Moscow Soviet and also with the greatest functionary of Moscow, Yegorychev, who insisted on this exhibition. As we later learned, this was a very broadly based provocation. I told Khrushchev about this.

RS: At what point?

EN: During our meeting in the Manège, I said they had directed this provocation against us and against him. Later, through an intermediary, Khrushchev confirmed this. The organizers of the exhibition

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argued that we should not show the work of the most extreme avant-gardists. Bilyutin wanted to limit the show to paintings, but I insisted that we should display the works of my group, which included the more avant-garde artists.

RS: After the exhibition did you become friends with Khrushchev?

EN: Khrushchev's assistant Lebedev demanded that I announce publicly that I respected Khrushchev and that his criticism of my work was correct. I refused to do this. All the other artists did it. I wrote a letter to Khrushchev in which I excused myself for any impoliteness, but then I expressed my views on art, which were the same as those I had offered in our argument at the unofficial exhibition, though this time I put them in a more polite form.

They told me: "Nikita Sergeyevich read your letter with interest but the Ideological Committee was not satisfied with your letter. We need several phrases and sentences from you." These were: you respect Khrushchev's criticism; you respect Khrushchev; and the criticism helped you in your creative work. I refused to do what they wanted. On the day that Khrushchev was removed, I called and asked that he be told the following: that I really deeply do respect Khrushchev because he let millions of people out of prison. Our aesthetic differences I considered nonessential. Lebedev said something interesting to me: "I didn't expect anything else from you."

For two years Lebedev called me once a week on Khrushchev's instructions. We [Neizvestny and Lebedev] met many times. Once I said to him: "We'll consider our conversation public having in mind the fact that the phone is bugged." The next day a representative of the K.G.B. comes to see me and said that the K.G.B. does not understand me. Why am I wrecking my life? I said to them that in order to understand me you cannot be a eunuch.

Lebedev died soon after our conversation about bugging, but he managed to relay what I said to Khrushchev. I was told that Khrushchev cried. He invited me to see him several times. I refused. Why? We would have started arguing again. That's stupid. On the day of Khrushchev's funeral, Khrushchev's son Sergei came to see me, and Mikoyan's son Sergei too. In Khrushchev's name they asked me to do the monument. Some time later Nina Petrovna, Khrushchev's wife, sent me a letter in which Khrushchev apologized for his rudeness to me. I said that an artist cannot be nastier than a politician, and I undertook that commission.

RS: Did Khrushchev help ease restrictions on what artists could produce?

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EN: Subjectively, Khrushchev helped to ease restrictions. But, according to the social laws of the USSR, my meeting with him was the moment of recognition of the existence of nonconformist art. Then nonconformist art became a social fact and thus acquired real features. Since I was the person who could argue with Khrushchev, they talked to me.

RS: To whom do you owe a sculptural debt?

EN: I'm ashamed to answer this question because my development occurred when I was studying at the Surikov Institute. We didn't even know about Picasso. The last sculptor whom we knew was Rodin. I studied from 1946–1954, but at the same time I studied various forms of esoteric and modern philosophy. In principle, I'm very fond of classical art, the art of the Greeks and Romans. I was surprised to discover that much of what I assumed to be original in the arts had already been done. When John Berger wrote that article about me and compared my work to Brancusi, Zadkine, Epstein, and Henry Moore, I didn't know their work.

RS: When did you become acquainted with the sculptors you've mentioned?

EN: Approximately eight years ago [1968]. Before that I saw some pictures, of course, but not many and not often.

RS: Has the work of other artists in other media—poetry, fiction, film—had an influence on your work?

EN: I've already mentioned that I was under the powerful influence of the metaphysical and philosophical Russian schools as well as the Russian avant-garde. And possibly, indirectly, I've been under the influence of Social Realism. I do not reject it because my conception of art is universal. I believe that great art can contain an element of banality because banality is life.

RS: Russia takes art seriously enough to threaten or jail those whose work it finds sufficiently threatening or offensive. Will your work have the same force in the West as it had in Russia? Does the possibility of a lessening of intensity worry you?

EN: In reality, that tension, which existed in Russia and which possibly stimulated my work, right now has been removed. But the K.G.B. was never my muse. My muse was my internal state. It continues. Will this have an effect on the Western viewer? I don't know. If the Western viewer perceives art only as a hedonistic object, then the West will be inimical to me. But I'm not going to change. I know that here this isn't heaven, not paradise, and that the general human problem which concerns me is not limited to geographical areas,

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that it is not regional, and that my work will find a response in people's hearts.

RS: Are you excited by America, by this New York environment?

EN: I like being here in Soho very much. I believe that life here is very interesting and dynamic. I have been quite successful in Europe. I have had shows in Europe and my work is being sold. Nevertheless, I want to live in the United States because the American rhythm is so appealing to me. I feel like a native American who has left and has forgotten the language and now has come back.

You know, all my life, even from childhood, I have had the feeling that somewhere near me there was a true, intense life. But I have never been able to live this life, rather I have always felt like I was living in a dream—a feeling that one day I will wake up and begin to live this life. I kept trying but I couldn't wake up.

When I went to Europe, this feeling remained. I was received by the richest people, presidents, cardinals, but all the same I had the feeling that I wasn't living my own life but was watching a movie. When I came to the United States—I mean only New York, because I haven't seen the rest of the country—I am delighted in a way that I hadn't imagined with all the bad things and with the good things. I am a New York drunk, I am a real drunk. A man from Soho is a real man. He has clothes that keep with the forms of life. Park Avenue, where I live, is a place for the rich, the very rich. Harlem is a place where the poor live, the real poor, true to life poor. I do not want to say that this is socially good, but these contrasts, this rhythm is very close to the rhythm of my nature. And for the first time in my life, I don't have an abnormal rhythm.

RS: Would you describe yourself as a Marxist or an anti-Marxist?

EN: In the sense that I don't believe in Marxist utopia, I suppose I am anti-Marxist. But I deeply respect Marx's analysis. It's just that I am an artist, and I'm less interested in economy than in the problem of what we are, where we are from, and where we are headed. Marx does not answer these questions. But without that answer man cannot live. I believe that Marxist analytic method has a future if it is developed. But a method cannot become a religion. And Marxists have made it a religion. In other fields, say semiotics, where Lévi-Strauss has invented a great method, that is only a method. And many have substituted Lévi-Strauss's method for a religion.

RS: So you think art has a social function?

EN: Art definitely has a social function: to remind man of his dignity and his freedom.

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RS: A number of artists in the English literary tradition have thought of themselves as poet-prophets. Do you believe there is a prophetic dimension to art?

EN: I think art is a very serious occupation. Art was born together with man and this proves that art is not only a public phenomenon but lies at the basis of man's deep internal nature and possibly goes beyond the bounds of mere human activity. In any case, I'm convinced that in true art it's possible to notice laws which are found not only in art but in human activity as a whole and in nature.

RS: If art can go beyond the bounds of man and man's limitations, then how?

EN: This is a complex question. But I think that communications are more complex and more universal than any other type of human activity.

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Quentin Anderson

NOTES ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CRITIC

Much contemporary literary criticism denies any effectual connection between writers and what they write. Twenty years ago, when voices as diverse as those of Empson and Leavis or Trilling and Wilson had an audience more or less in common, literary criticism could be thought of as characterized by the authority of individuals; their readers could make choices or express differences, and literary criticism in English was only marginally affected by theories which offered general assertions about the properties of language.

At present, critical rhetoric characteristically creates contexts in which the critic is not heard from as a judge of anything in particular; instead he makes an assertion so inclusive that one has to resee the world under his lordship. Deserts of detached textuality, scoured of effectual reference to us and our world, become private playgrounds for those who simply assert that we cannot *explain* how language really works to sustain meanings, express feelings, and tie us to breathing others. There are many other highly important questions in human affairs which are quite as inexplicable; why is this one such an exciting and engrossing discovery just now? Whether we are left, as Derrida, with an infinite regress in our attempts to ground meaning, or, as in the inquiry into civilization of Michel Foucault, with the conclusion that our whole perspective on the world is the work of a Nobodaddy who seeks to dominate us hardly matters. What does matter is that both literature and history are being considered as subject to conditions that necessitate apocalyptic resolutions. Brilliant as the two I have mentioned are, their taste for apocalypse indicates a strong impulse to transcend the human scale, significant because it seems appealing to many able people. What are the personal powers assumed by those who make these massive appropriations of the world, so extensive as to demand a total change, powers assumed by a Derrida, a J. Hillis Miller, or a Harold Bloom?

Bloom's is a suggestive case because, although he too transports us

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into a world made up of what has been written, he does say that it is the scene of a struggle for power; he finds both writers and critics grappling in the blue, and claiming a total imaginative dominion over each other—and over us. Of course he is wrong in saying that writers have always made such total claims for what they wrote. The last century was obviously fascinated by its wonderful but sharply particularized and limited human agents. Novels, theories, poems, were social presences, whose makers were viewed as subject to the limitations that conditioned the reader's views and hopes. Leave out that peopled public world, leave out the writer's sense of its attentive eyes and responding voices, and you get Bloom's picture of naked wills contending in print.

Bloom is wrong about the past in the measure that writers formerly did acknowledge that they were immersed in a social scene which limited their extravagant claims to power. What Bloom does inform us about is the present moment; he exposes the monstrous claims to personal power hidden behind ostensibly self-contained critical games. Most of those at play within the universe of texts don't admit that they have made up games of solitaire; that he who creates the context owns the store. In France those who use such grandly inclusive modes of thought are assumed to have a correlative political position, and generally do.

In the United States such grandiose claims to imperial power for the self have long been familiar, but they have had the character of substitutes or stand-ins for politics. Consider Gertrude Stein's assertion about the writer: "I am not I any longer when I see." She goes on: "This sentence is at the bottom of all creative activity. It is just the exact opposite of I am I because my little dog knows me." Such total appropriations of the world on the part of the seer have an effect indistinguishable from that of Emerson's activity as seer; he also possesses the world in the visionary mode which precludes any acknowledgement of the world of little dogs and other people whose awkward independence of his vision he denies. Our American habit is to deny that he has denied anything—including politics—and celebrate his affirmation of a wholly sufficient vision of things. We substitute the privilege of universalizing ourselves for an actual politics. French thought imported into the United States wholly loses its overt political character and becomes one more set of strategies for claiming individual power through the use of apparently impersonal vocabularies.

Contemporary literary study offers the clearest instances of this process. The ambitious young commentators in the graduate schools

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stumble about until they discover that there is no way of coping with the discourse of a Derrida or his American fellows except by making claims just as absolute as theirs. No wonder that a community of judging selves, able to understand and appraise each other's judgments, has become unthinkable for most of these young scholars. This impulse to isolate literature from individuals and to rob the imagination of its power to make alternative proposals about the character of human affairs, in short, to impoverish our sense of ourselves as actors on a human scene, appears to be a more energetic version of the impulses which foster contemporary religious movements. These often assume a likeness to a cocoon embracing the whole world, a self-sustaining context for those no longer able to bear the pressures of the times.

The academy, or that segment of it represented by the imposing list of scholars and critics on the board of *Critical Inquiry*, seems quite unprepared to counter these massive appropriations of literature for various forms of supraterrestrial play by hidden godlings. Those who write for the magazine appear to assume that the search for a sufficient method of inquiry need not involve any awareness of the distinctive character of those who pursue it. The exchange between Wayne Booth and Meyer Abrams in the spring 1976 issue is a good example.

Booth, one of the most learned and alert of American commentators on the methods and procedures of literary inquiry, begins the discussion in an engaging way by proposing to discover why it is that he finds himself so completely persuaded by Abrams's book *Natural Supernaturalism*. I will try to suggest what the book enforces for those who accept its argument.

It is more than a major piece of literary history; it gives the romantic movement a position it has not heretofore had in the English-speaking world. Abrams gives a persuasive account of the traits common to the movement in Germany and England, and of its continuity with the Christian and classical past. Without reducing Hegel as philosopher or Wordsworth as poet, Abrams succeeds in making the work of those engaged in the effort to comprehend the meaning of the failure of the French Revolution to realize their hopes, definitive of important aspects of nineteenth-century literature and of leading strands in nineteenth-century thought. What is most striking in the light of what has been said here of the kind of power individual critics are now covertly assuming, is that the romantics are not proclaiming the need for a total change in our apprehension of the

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world, but trying to act as individual agents in describing and judging a human world—a burden they must now assume since the religious and social structures which earlier framed that world no longer do so. The book may be said to be about the efforts of individuals to shoulder the weight of the human situation, and, in Wordsworth's terms, do so as men speaking to men.

When Booth concludes his scrupulous account of all the means Abrams has employed in his book he finds that they do not serve to account for his conviction that the book makes its case. His problem, as I see it, is that he has not assented to Abrams's personal agency in his (Booth's) own history as a judging self; he has assented to a text. For many purposes Abrams's book cannot be identified with him; it pays no taxes and eats no breakfast. But for the purpose at hand, a compelling account of the romantic movement and its consequences, it must be identified with Abrams, who has tried to tell a true story about the past which is continuous not alone with Wordsworth's account of the human situation but also with Abrams's own consciousness of his own situation. Abrams finds Wordsworth's account of the powers and responsibilities of individual human agents part of a history he is led to accept as antecedent to views he now holds. If Booth truly concurs he must simply announce himself persuaded. (He remains at liberty to change his mind.) Booth's effort to find good arguments for Abrams's position is laudable; his failure to reach a demonstrable conclusion is reassuring. Had he done so he would be in effect claiming what an animal forever making itself cannot have: a godlike certainty.

In his reply to Booth, Abrams says that in writing his book he had relied "on taste, tact, and intuition rather than a controlling method." The "means" Abrams employs throw the full burden of decision on the judging self. Booth's analysis, lively and friendly as it is, snaps the tie between the judging self and the tools it employs in order to examine the tools. This species of instrumentalism or pragmatism should by now have become notorious for its incapacity to cope with encounters between two or more people. We can and must estimate the value and force of the judgments others make; the hope that an appraisal of the means used to express these judgments can fully account for their sources or their persuasive effect amounts to a parodic scientism.

No investigation of means, methods, or principles can sum up the resources of judgment a critic such as Abrams displays. Nor can we count on such an investigation to enable us to deal with critical

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contexts so inclusive that they do not permit discourse among peers. The taste for human and historical reality can hardly be implanted by an act of will, but we can say that those who deny that individuals make judgments limited by their own and the collective past should be told that they have not acknowledged the limitations of the agent who makes judgments. Those who do make this acknowledgment must turn for appraisal to the indispensable company of those whose knowledge is informed by their power to judge. If Abrams is right, these massive appropriations of the world as text—or of the whole human condition as designed to oppress us!—must be thought of as attempts to undo the romantic movement. The burden of individual judgment Kant sought to describe, which Wordsworth in his great years consciously assumed, is more than these thinkers can bear.

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Betty Falkenberg

THOMAS BERNHARD

"You know the great Cimabue *Crucifixion?*" Francis Bacon says to David Sylvester in one of the early interviews (1962). "I always think of that as an image—as a worm crawling down the cross."

Between a *Crucifixion* by Francis Bacon and Rembrandt's painting of *The Slaughtered Ox*, a third image intercedes: it is a photo made by Thomas Bernhard for the film version of his fragment, *The Italian.* It shows a butcher slitting open the carcass of a huge ox, whose entrails are pouring out.

"My first impressions . . ." writes Bernhard, "my way to school, the very first day, took me past a butcher's shop on whose open doors hung hooks, hammers, knives, all neatly arranged in rows, the ones bloody, the others sparkling clean—slaughterhouse apparatus . . . then from the butcher's shop a few steps on to the cemetery, the halls with coffins lying on biers, the vaults . . . and from there to the school-desk . . . a young woman teacher."

"Well, of course, we are meat," says Francis Bacon, "we are potential carcasses. . . ."

In a way and to a degree unequalled by any of his contemporaries, Handke, Kroetz, the entire Graz or "Viennese Group" (Artmann, Beyer, Achleitner) together, the work of Thomas Bernhard is unsettling. Long excluded from their ranks (Bernhard, a native Austrian, was denied publication in the "organs" of both groups), he still remains, despite the belated recognition of his genius, the loner he always was.

Long before literary critics began speculating about the influence of Wittgenstein on Handke's ambivalence towards language, Bernhard had incorporated the Wittgenstein skepsis into his prose. "Words," says the protagonist of his novel, *Limeworks*, "are made to degrade thought, yes, he would even go so far as to say words were there to do away with thought."

The hero of *Korrektur* (*Revisions*), Bernhard's most recent novel (1975), shares certain biographical facts with the master. Both are Austrian scientists who feel stifled by their native homeland; both go to

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Cambridge, England, to study and teach. The hero of *Korrektur* reads and rereads Wittgenstein "because he thought to recognize himself in the writings of Wittgenstein who came from the same countryside and who had always been such an acute observer of that countryside." Madness and suicide are endemic to the families of both, as they are, indeed, to post-Hapsburg Austria itself.

But it is not so much in statement as in style that Bernhard can claim his forebear. His dogged rejection of ordinary speech in favor of a quasi-scientific bloodlessness is one of the starkest examples in contemporary prose writing of pounding out an overriding obsession through seeming objectivity. The closest parallel in German literature in this respect is Büchner, who in Wozzeck touches most deeply when he is being most clinical. In an age in which most affective speech has become faded metaphor at best, this approach seems all the more powerful. Bernhard's prose is, moreover, the unclouded mirror—for all its seeming quirkiness it is not murky—of his thought. Its rhythms are integral to that thought; its breaths and breathlessnesses are comparable to the long lines of a long Mozart aria. Bernhard has an infallible ear for cadence, for building up tensions to the breaking point and then releasing them for just an eighth-note rest before going on. He also appreciates the comic effect of a comma. In fact, everything in Bernhard's prose serves a rhythmic as well as a narrative function. Take his device used to set up distance between author and reader, material and interpretation. It might be called—not station-identification, but narrator-identification—and it arises out of another device characteristic of him, namely to tell his story through the account of at least one, but generally two, third persons. After pages and pages of what may remind some of Faulkner's, or more likely, Beckett's pauseless prose, Bernhard will interject a punctuating note: "So Fro," or "So Wieser." After a while these punctuating elements work like refrains, refrains which can then be varied: "So Konrad to Fro," or "as Konrad supposedly said to Fro," or finally, "as Konrad already in October said to Fro." Coming, as they generally do, in the midst of some thoroughly horrific episode, their casual banality offers a moment of comic relief. It is a tiny trick, but it is brilliant. It jolts the reader and causes him to reflect on the absurdity of all things, even, or especially, the *condition humaine,* in all its sordid as well as petty ramifications. Because all Bernhard's books, all his plays, are really about one thing: death. Death in death, death in life, the futility of all human contact or attempts at understanding, the senselessness of all existence and the cruelty of creating new life, the stupidity of all human beings, the futility of all

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systems, political or religious, both encompassing as they do the same corruption and stupidity to be found everywhere else. If there is one thing which can bind people together—and the nature of that bond is at best ambivalent—it can only be the awareness of the total hopelessness of all human endeavor in the light of the fact of death.

Handke has referred to the "idiocy" of language, and following Wittgenstein, has tried to pursue the relation between language and reality, exploring deracination and alienation from various vantage points, often flirting, in the process, with current pop modes. What is appealing about him is his willingness to be both patient, unetherized upon the table, and surgeon, performing the operation himself. Somehow he always manages to survive. At present, he seems to be leaning toward a somewhat more conventional mode of story telling, after having gone through the agonies of a self-inflicted Kaspar Hauser crisis.

Bernhard never *had* any illusions to begin with. He never flirted with any current idioms, pop or other. Rather, with a truly relentless consistency, he set about doing what he had to do, and whether ridiculed or crowned with prizes, he goes right on doing it. Bernhard would go further than Handke, and declare *both* language and reality "idiocy." Estrangement, "alienation," is the natural condition of man. Writing itself is a disease, a tumor. No sooner does one think oneself rid of it than a new one begins to grow . . . "a novel . . . in effect nothing but a malignant tumor, a cancer . . . and there is no hope and no way out."

Bernhard's latest novel, *Korrektur (Revisions)*, may be viewed as an almost perfect inversion of the theme of *Kalkwerk* (*Limeworks*), in which the protagonist is hindered by psychological blocks from putting down on paper the results of a scientific study on hearing which he has been carrying around in his head for decades. *Kalkwerk*, in turn, harks back to the still earlier novel, *Verstörung* (*Disturbances*), in which a mad prince paces his study, dreaming of the life he never lived, the scholarly essays he never completed.

Konrad, in *Kalkwerk*, molds his entire environment to serve as a laboratory for his experiments, ruthlessly disregarding human wishes and needs. The Limeworks, chosen for its isolation and forbidding exterior as the ideal setting for his work, is further transformed by him into a jail-like enclosure. It is Konrad's belief that this work can be accomplished only by the exclusion of every possible distraction. He subjects his crippled and totally helpless wife to the same cruel and austere discipline as he imposes upon himself. Long before he shoots

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her, in a fit of despair and madness, he has destroyed her *and* himself by the sheer ruthlessness of his routines and obsessions.

In *Korrektur,* the protagonist, Roithamer, does indeed complete his bizarre project: to construct, against almost insurmountable odds, a conical dwelling for his beloved sister in the exact center of a forest near their hated home, and to write out the details of its construction in scientific, structural engineering terms, along with a local and family chronicle, explaining in human terms, why such a construction was essential to the happiness of his sister and to his own self-fulfillment. In achieving the delicate balance he seeks, he applies principles from the Law of Statics. That the author was fascinated by the poetic and philosophic implications of scientific laws could be seen already in his choice of motto from an earlier play. *The Hunting-Party (Die Jagdgesellschaft)* in which he quotes from Kleist's famous essay on the puppet theater: "I then made inquiries about the mechanisms of these figures, and asked how it was possible—without having myriad strings attached to one's fingers—to direct each limb and all of its parts, the way the rhythm of the dance required it." (The essay goes on to explain that each movement has its own center of gravity.)

If, in *Kalkwerk,* ruination is the result of noncompletion of a project, in *Korrektur,* ruination is the precise result of the completion of the projects, both the actual building and the chronicling. On completion of the cone, Roithamer's sister dies, only death being able to contain such sublime joy. And on her death, Roithamer, reviewing both his scheme and the written account of it, comes to the shattering conclusion that nothing short of total revision can eradicate the errors contained in the work. (In *Verstörung,* the mad prince works day and night, writing and destroying what he has written, writing and destroying: ". . . and if I destroy everything, yes, everything that I have written up to now, he said, then I will have made the greatest advance. . . .") But total revision comes to mean total reduction, not just of the products of his (Roithamer's) mind, but finally, annihilation of himself. (If one doubts the credibility of such a notion, one may remind oneself of the increasingly elliptical poems of Paul Celan, whose work and life seemed to come to a single impasse for which suicide proved the only way out.)

Limeworks ends with its hero giving himself up to the police after being found, half-frozen to death, in the sewage dump near his house. For the hero of *Korrektur* there is no alternative to suicide. His only freedom consists in choosing how and where.

His choice is significant and pulls the threads of the entire novel

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together. Among the formative experiences of his childhood, as described first by his friend and literary executor in a long, discursive passage, notable for its beautiful rhythmic structure, his long walk through the woods to school emerges as *the* decisive experience. In fact, he tells us, an early literary effort of the hero's was itself devoted to a description of this walk, and was entitled "The Clearing." That Roithamer should choose to hang himself from a tree in the clearing is more than a literary nicety. In our beginning is our end. Every word, every deed shall be eradicated. "Clearing." So ends the book.

Some critics have argued that there is no justification for the division of *Korrektur* into two parts (the *only* division other than commas and periods to be found in the entire 362 pages), on the grounds that there is no difference in the material presented in the two parts. But in part two, where the narrator withdraws, and Roithamer is permitted to tell his own tale, albeit filtered through his notes, a far more impassioned tone breaks through; he rails against the various members of his family with a venom verging on paranoia, until, at the very end, he brings himself up short, recognizing the need for correction, if not reconciliation. It is this dual movement in part two, first forward and then back, that gives the book its tremendous momentum. Moreover, it is the contrast—the balance and beauty of construction of part one poised against the torrential outpourings in part two—which causes the reader to revise his own judgments of the hero, from that of an idealistic scientific spirit to a sick human being obsessed with hatred to a final acceptance of both sides of his person. It is this very tension between the two parts, finally, that gives the book its rich texture and unexpected overtones.

Many themes echo and re-echo throughout the pages of *Korrektur*. The most striking, perhaps because of its uncanny resemblance to Joyce's obsession with that same theme, is the love-hate to the motherland, "the old sow that eats her farrow." Bernhard is not queasy in describing the bovine qualities of the would-be nurturer, mother and Mother both.

Another phrase from Joyce, from the notebooks, comes to mind in connection with Bernhard: "centripetal writing." Or, put differently, in musical terms, the fugal working out of themes. Even in the handling of tiny details, a larger pattern of symmetry, that can only be perceived in retrospective perusal of all Bernhard's novels up to now, emerges after *Korrektur*: just as a fugue does not merely progress forward, but returns always to its center, amplified.

In addition to the already cited passages from different novels with

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corresponding resonances, a few others make this point abundantly clear. In describing the purposely deceptive landscaping of the grounds around the Limeworks to increase its inaccessibility, Bernhard writes, "The actual thing is always actually different, the precise opposite of what it actually is." *Korrektur* ends with the speculation by Roithamer, on his last train ride from London back to Austria: "All he had written about Altensam (his home village), and everyone there, was different, other, than he had described it." And from *Verstörung*: "Probably everything that I think is different from what I think it to be, I thought."

Or again, the themes of solitude and ruthlessness in the pursuit of one's goal: ruthlessness toward all human beings but especially toward oneself is the *sine qua non* of all creative work. Madness is the dog barking at one's door, but until one has finished the job, one must close one's ears to it. "It is enough to drive one crazy," says the hero of *Kalkwerk*, "but I will not allow myself to go crazy." And, just a page earlier, "One must be willing to commit any monstrosity, any crime even, in order to achieve one's aim. Without ruthlessness, nothing." Similarly, in *Korrektur*: "Then we awake and see that we have achieved what we set out to achieve, because we were uncompromising, and above all, uncompromising toward ourselves."

All the rooms of all the plays and all the novels, regardless of size or shape, are in effect prison chambers. Some are self-imposed confines; others not.

But it is the way in which motifs are worked and reworked that demonstrates Bernhard's growing artistry and its consummation in *Korrektur*. Earlier we noted his description, in connection with *The Italian*, of his way to school, already then regarded by him as being of the greatest significance for his later life. In *Korrektur*, we see this theme elaborated on; the dark foreboding landscape of the rock caverns and narrow river bed of the great woods give mythic shape to the hidden treacheries and luminous terrors of that childhood path.

The form of the fugue was derived from the earlier "ricercar," "to seek again." Each new book of Bernhard's should be read with this in mind.

In his thought-provoking essay on Handke in *The Making of Modern Drama*, Richard Gilman shows how Handke uses dramatic conventions and traditions against themselves "in a judo-like action" and wins. Similarly, in an article on Kroetz (*Partisan Review* #3, 1976), Gilman shows how *that* young man, equally deploring the conventions of the theater, follows in the venerable tradition of Pirandello,

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Brecht, et al., by making what he most despises work for him. A similar case may be made for Bernhard, both in his plays and in his fictions, which he claims are anyway conceived theatrically. "In my books everything is artificial, that is, every figure, every event plays itself out on a stage, and the stage itself is total darkness. The work illumines . . . slowly, out of the background, words emerge. . . ." Like Beckett's, Bernhard's plays are generally enacted on bare stages.

Kroetz, the young Bavarian playwright, calls his work "A drama built on silences. A theater of the inarticulate." This description may again be applied to Bernhard's use of dialogue—with one difference. Bernhard does not limit his notion of inarticulateness to one social class as does Kroetz, but believes it inherent in human communications altogether. Bernhard's characters are not really individuals, and their speech is not really dialogue, but a monomaniacal talking past one another. They exist as stylized versions of mental and physical basket-cases, cut off from the very selves out of whose mouths the words appear to come.

By bleeding his characters of their individuality, by antiseptically draining their speech of all contemporary jargon, Bernhard achieves a pristine quality that is strangely modern, deriving its very power from its unsayingness. A few lines from *The President* may serve to illustrate the point.

Sighs and groans from the president in the bathroom
President's wife, into the bathroom
    My husband
    has suffered a shock
    The third assassination attempt
    in four weeks
    But he loves to go
    to the Monument for the Unknown Soldier
looks in the mirror
    Mrs. President
leans back and bursts out laughing
    Mrs. President
grows suddenly silent and peers into empty dog-basket
speaking with the dog
    See
puts on make-up
    One red
    One gray
    One black
    Another red
    A gray

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Every day the same thing
my darling
We get up
We get washed
We get dressed
Then we have breakfast
looks into the empty dog-basket
It was a mistake
We shouldn't have
gone to the Monument for the Unknown Soldier
Those dreadful people
And then you will get
what you wished for
all right
puts on make-up, combs her hair
President, from the bathroom
with whom are you talking out there
President's wife, as if she were looking for something under the dressing-table
with him
with him
into the empty dog-basket
with you
President, to his masseur
She talks with the dog
do you hear
my wife talks with her dog
who is no longer there

What is "merely" morbid in the novels becomes absurd in the plays. The dividing line is a thin one as every true clown has always known.

Again, as the work of Bernhard grows, and the total pattern emerges ever more clearly, it yields a fascination over and above that which might accrue to any of the individual parts. Unlike Gide's novels, which argue with each other, or Yeats's *Ego Dominus Tuus*, Bernhard seeks no antiself. Nor does he write to "find" his self. His apparent cancelling out of prior attitudes or viewpoints with each new book is inherent in, and consistent with, his view of the ultimate senselessness of all attitudes or viewpoints. The two sides of the equation balance; there is merely a narrowing down: to zero equals zero. Finally, language itself petrifies, breaks down. [This process, namely of the breakdown of language, has been utilized, indeed capitalized on, by the "new" German film makers who have their characters talk not merely inarticulately, but inaudibly as well. Small

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wonder that the rash of Kaspar Hauser plays and films has hit Germany so markedly of late.] In Bernhard plays, the sparse texts appear as vertical blocks, like stone slabs, unevenly hewn, with lots of space between. In the novels, the horizontal reigns; pages shed margins, paragraph indentations disappear. In terms of his own dialectic, it is all the same. An empty room can be as claustrophobic as a Biedermeier parlor. Or, in the words of Pascal, as quoted in the motto to *Verstörung*, "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." And wherever one is, one is alone.

Author's note: Since the writing of this essay, *Korrektur* has been published in English by Alfred A. Knopf under the title *Correction*. The translation is by Sophie Wilkins.

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GOING TO THE MOVIES

Jonathan Baumbach

THE SIXTEENTH NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

The Sixteenth New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center opened with Robert Altman's *A Wedding* and closed with Claude Chabrol's *Violette*, both of which were released in commercial theaters a day or two later. The event of the Festival seems to be guided, perhaps circumstantially, by conflicting impulses: to present a range of the best available film art and to show cinema that will attract a sizable audience. It is a classic ambivalence and it tends to manifest itself in uneasy compromises that satisfy neither purpose. It may be symptomatic that two of the freshest films screened at the Sixteenth Festival were retrospectives of work made over fifty years ago, *Spies* by Fritz Lang and *The Miracle of the Wolves* by Raymond Bernard. Beyond these two, the new Chabrol, the Rohmer, and the Skolimowski, the Sixteenth New York Film Festival tended to be respectable at the expense of risk, interesting without being exciting. I like to see the Festival as occasion for screenings of the most difficult and uncompromising cinema—so little of it finds distribution these days—and not for showings of made-for-TV look-a-likes like Robert Mulligan's *Bloodbrothers*, which already has its audience. The following are my impressions of some of the more distinctive films.

A Wedding, Robert Altman

Altman tends to insist in interviews these days that critics, meaning reviewers, take his work more seriously than it is meant, reading in symbolic implication where none is intended. One begins to suspect that his insistent disclaimer of seriousness is at once disingenuous and serious. *A Wedding* is a characteristic Altman circus, fast-paced, high-pitched, edgily satirical, with more going on at any given time than the senses can readily encompass. The wedding between Dino and Muffin, between new wealth and old, is an occasion for a succession of satiric revelations concerning forty-eight supernumerary characters. Some of the revelations are insightful—their wit coming out of the exaggeration of genuine possibility—but most, particularly as the film moves

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toward some sort of resolution, are arbitrary contrivances for sensational effect, cheap shots, farce run amok. Everyone is significantly less than he seems. The bride's witless sister, Buffy, is pregnant with the groom's child. One of the groom's aunts is having an affair with a servant. The bride's parents, new money Southerners, are gauche and overbearing beyond the expectations of stereotype. The groom's father is a former Italian waiter masquerading as a gentleman. The groom's aristocratic mother is a heroin addict kept together by the cynical family doctor, a man with a predilection for brushing invisible cigaret ash from women's bosoms. The wedding coordinator gets a crush on the bride and makes an awkward pass at her. And so on, until the egregious melodramatic climax in which mischance ends in violence. Much of *A Wedding* is funny, particularly the opening scenes, and we find ourselves unwittingly taking pleasure in the film's condescension toward its characters. Altman's newest movie is a work of exhilarating facility that ultimately vitiates itself by the meanness of its vision, a skillful, self-infatuated satire of nothing at all.

The Green Room, Francois Truffaut

A more admirable disappointment than the Altman, the new Truffaut, which has a number of beautiful passages, suffers from a confusion of impulses. Loosely adapted from Henry James's "Altars of the Dead," Truffaut tells the story of a man obsessed with keeping alive the memory of "his dead" with only metaphoric conviction. The film's apparent concern is with missed connection, with a man (Truffaut playing his protagonist, Julien Davenne) so committed to the dead past, he is unable to accept the love of a living woman until he is dying himself. *The Green Room* has more in common with *The Story of Adele H* than with anything else Truffaut has done, sharing with that beautiful earlier film an intensity that verges on unintentional comedy. The power of *The Green Room* is dependent on the hermetic quality of Julien's obsession.. One sequence, in particular, gives the film away. Ostensibly showing his confidant, Cecilia (Nathalie Baye), photographs of "his dead," as he calls them, Julien/Truffaut treats us to a passage of literary and cinematic homages, Truffaut memorializing *his* heroes, further confusing the identity between character and director. When Truffaut introduces a world outside and irrelevant to the immediate film, *The Green Room* loses its urgency. Consequently, when the dying Julien and Cecilia come together in belated recognition of their love for one another, the scene seems bald and sentimental,

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less and more than one wants. The Truffaut hero of *The Green Room* is the opposite (that is, the same in opposing disguise) of the hero of *The Man Who Loved Women.* One pursues women with impersonal dedication, rarely staying with the same one very long, while the other is interested in only one woman, his dead wife, whose convenient absence makes possible a devotion so perfect it approximates art. The two films offer two versions of the same narcissism, disguised parables of the artist's dilemma, the obsessions of art precluding the immediacies of living relationships.

The Left-Handed Woman, Peter Handke

Peter Handke's first film, adapted from his own short novel, is an impressive, miscalculated attempt to reimagine his own material in cinematic language. A train interrupts the landscape at the start, severing it by its passage and restoring it by its absence, a visual correlative for Handke's story. The movie is nothing if not cinematic, is full of evocative, subtextual detail while staying as close to the text of the novel as the shift in medium allows. While the novel is spare and eloquent, touching despite the coolness of its mode, the film tends to be tedious and literal for all the beautiful visual details of Robby Muller's camera. The heroine discards her husband for no apparent reason, on impulse, a reflexive, unintelligible gesture. We get flashes of her living alone with her son, painfully improvising her new life. The material of the novel—the novel cinematic in itself—seems intractable as cinema. The novel is at once opaque and lucid, mysterious and aesthetically complete. The film, by interpreting the action through performance, demystifies the novel, makes its odd movement seem willfully retarded and gratuitous, the image literalizing the text. Although well acted by Edith Clever and Bruno Ganz and exquisitely photographed, the film of *The Left-Handed Woman* seems a redundant gesture.

Percival, Eric Rohmer

As with *The Left-Handed Woman,* one admires Rohmer's theatrical film of Chrétien de Troyes's account of the grail quest without taking much pleasure from it. Rohmer, who is one of the most painstakingly precise of filmmakers, has chosen to stylize the narrative within a conspicuously artificial setting based on drawings of the period. Characters read the text, including "he said" and "she said," commenting on their roles as they perform them. A chorus narrates the interludes in song. The effect is charming for awhile—the *mise en*

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scène characteristically beautiful—and one admires the wit and audacity of the conception, particularly the ending (a scene I was unable to find in Chrétien) where Percival imagines himself as penance enacting the role of Jesus in a passion play. Finally, despite the power of Frabrice Luchini's comic performance in the title role, the static quality of the film becomes self-defeating. It is admirable to work against the strictures of the medium—a narrative tension in itself—as Rohmer does here and elsewhere, but in this case the rewards tend to be minimal. It is for the opportunity to see films like *Percival*, unrealized works of great originality and risk, that one values the New York Film Festival most.

Spies, Fritz Lang

This is the first time *Spies* has been made available in its three-hour version to American audiences. Fifty-one years after its initial release, Lang's film about ubiquitous subversion is astonishingly fresh. The issue behind the conflict in *Spies* is determinedly unclear. The battle in Lang's films is not so much over issues or ideologies, but between respectability and evil, between the compromised ordinary world and the unscrupulous power seeker. As in the Mabuse films, Lang invests evil with a terrifying potency. Good triumphs fortuitously, but the paranoid nightmare of Lang's world survives the film's outcome. The master spy, Haghi (Rudolph Klein Rogge), is a much more engaging figure than the ostensible hero, the ineffectual lovesick detective, Number 326. In the last scene, in his third identity, Haghi plays out his final moment on a stage before an audience and makes a triumphant gesture out of his defeat. It is almost as if this power-mad demagogue were the controlling consciousness of the film. In its three-hour version, *Spies* is a masterpiece, the major discovery of this Festival.

Despair, Rainer Werner Fassbinder

This elaborate adaptation of an early Nabokov novel is the thirty-one-year-old Fassbinder's thirty-second film. The films tend to be impressive and unfinished, derivative and original, marred by brilliances. Where early Fassbinder seemed to be influenced by Godard, *Despair* is in the manner of Alain Resnais. I use the word manner pejoratively here. Fassbinder's first English language film has more finish than most of his other work and less distinction and vitality. The informing idea of the narrative has considerable wit. Hermann, one of

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Nabokov's whimsical, self-infatuated narrators, a Russian emigré living in Germany in the early thirties, perceives as his double a laborer who bears him little or no resemblance. Eager to escape his present circumstances, he plans to murder himself in the figure of his ostensible double. Predictably, no one identifies the corpse as Hermann, the possibility never in question. The film of *Despair* is so suffused with evocative details, is so world-weary and ironic that the plot only asserts itself in the second half and then as an apparent afterthought. In a characteristically impressive sequence, Hermann (Dirk Bogarde) witnesses himself making love to his wife while sitting in a chair at the end of a long hall, or perceives himself sitting in a chair while making love to his wife. That he sees himself as his own double, however, undermines the notion that he can perceive someone who bears him no resemblance also as a double. *Despair* is an elegantly laborious tour de force that, like the main gesture of its protagonist, comes to grief.

The Shout, Jerzy Skolimowski

In answer to the query, "Don't you think a film ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end," Godard is reputed to have said, "Yes, but not necessarily in that order." Skolimowski, in his first English language film, tells his exotic story—really, a story within a story—with willful confusion of time, playing off the nightmare of fragmented structure against the horror film conventions of the narrative. As with Skolimowski's earlier movies, *The Shout* has considerable energy and inventiveness, moving as it does between subjective reality and rational explanation. Alan Bates plays the sorcerer-madman who tells the interior story while helping to score a cricket match played at an insane asylum. Within his own narrative, the Bates figure is a man capable of producing a shout of such enormous power that it kills whoever hears the sound. He moves in with a musician and his wife, using his apparent sorcery to torment the man and make love to the woman. Whether the central figure is monstrous or a harmless madman—both possibilities exist with equal justice—finally requires no answer. The plays between real and illusory occasion the inventiveness of the film. It is the fragmented form of *The Shout,* the confusion of tenses, the wit of its invented order, and not the narrative, that make the Skolimowski film an arresting work.

Violette, Claude Chabrol

Like *The Shout* and *Despair,* the new Chabrol, which held sway closing night, is determinedly ambiguous. Based on a real event, an

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eighteen-year-old French girl's poisoning of her parents in 1933, the film makes no attempt to clarify motives or to penetrate the opacity of Violette Nozière's behavior. As with *The Shout*, though not so schematically, time sequences are reversed or confused, intensifying the puzzle-like quality of the film. Both aspects of Violette's double life—bourgeois teenager, conniving woman of the streets—contain their own contradictions, deviousness cloaked in innocence, integrity secreted in decadence. Violette (Isabelle Huppert) pursues an idea of freedom, fleeing the entrapment of petit bourgeois life, ultimately exchanging one form of imprisonment for another. Her parents' awkward sexual conjunctions in the room next door—the two room apartment they share suffocatingly small—involve Violette as if she were in bed with them. Consequently, when Violette, on trial for murdering her father, accuses him of incestuous attack, one perceives the subjective truth within the lie. The triumph of *Violette*—the best work Chabrol has done since *Wedding in Blood*—is as much in the strategy of its unfolding as in the complex characterization of its heroine. Chabrol shows us Violette at her worst, at her most devious and vicious, and yet manages remarkably to enlist sympathy for her. When Violette returns home to discover her parents dead from the poison she has given them (in the guise of medicine), she eats the cold meat from their uneaten dinner with a cannibal's compulsion, ingesting her parents through the sacrament of the meat, incorporating them into herself. Her rebellion is for them as well, an acting out of the unexpressed rages of stultifying respectability. As in *Le Boucher*, the film of Chabrol's with which *Violette* has most in common, the monster turns out to be at once pathetic and perversely heroic, a seismographic figure. It is a recurrent concern in the cinema of Chabrol to show us the pinpoint of light in the darkest extremes of human behavior. *Violette*, though based on documentary material, is a transcendent work of the imagination.

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BOOKS

INDELICATE HOMICIDE

CARLOS: PORTRAIT OF A TERRORIST. By Colin Smith. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. $8.95.

HITLER'S CHILDREN: THE STORY OF THE BAADER-MEINHOF TERRORIST GANG. By Jillian Becker. Lippincott. $12.50.

Terrorists figure among the most prominent characters in the modern novel. Reviewing my own collection of favorite heroes, I see Conrad's diminutive professor, who roams the streets of London wrapped in enough explosives to obliterate every surrounding trace of life should they come to arrest him; the silhouette of Cheng, whose knife, buried deep in the sleeping man's flesh, is the spectacular opening of Malraux's *La condition humaine*; and that handful of *justes*, whom Camus also calls delicate murderers, preparing the bomb to kill the grand duke.

Whether they operate in Victorian London, Czarist Russia, or the Kuomitang China, these professionals in terror—and their counterparts from other books I recall—have two things in common. First, they are convinced that individual violence can bring about positive social change, accelerating the progress of history. Second, they are intellectuals—or, to put it more precisely, intelligent people—for whom action is the outgrowth of analysis and firm philosophical convictions. Typically, they are the most bitter of moralists.

But the romantic notion of the terrorist is not peculiar to the novel. It is chiefly in political writing from and about Latin America that one notices a comparable idealization of violence as an agent of social change, as well as an idealization of the revolutionary as a being who fuses theory and practice, intelligence and action, ethical behavior and military aptitude. These days, however, the illusions of theory as the basis for guerrilla activity and of armed propaganda and revolutionary violence as the only response to the violence of social and economic structures in Latin America have turned out to be obvious fallacies, especially after all the refutations inflicted on them by reality. Such ideas have not advanced the revolution in Latin America. On the contrary, they have alienated large segments of the population from the political vanguard, segments such as the farmers, the working and middle classes who favor change but who nowhere support the

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guerrillas in significant numbers and who are repulsed by violent action as well as by an awareness of the futility in confronting modern soldiers armed to the teeth. Such ideas have contributed to the proliferation of castrating dictatorships.

Among those who seized upon these ideas, endorsed by a Cuban revolution presenting itself somewhat inaccurately as an example of their truth, were the young students from the middle or upper classes, impatient to put an end to social injustices in their country and eager for excitement. During the 1960s, the progressive intellectuals of Europe, as well as Debray, were won over by this new romanticism and through him they discovered (or better, *invented*) Latin America. When reality did not conform to this romanticism, they felt deceived, and many displaced their interest to another segment of the Third World—the Palestinians, for example—more in line with their incurable nostalgia for direct action. For the Latin Americans who tried to act out these myths and who, after a few week's training in Cuba, China, or North Korea, established guerrilla strongholds in the mountains of their countries or later formed urban commandos, the disillusionment was even more tragic because it meant death, imprisonment, torture. From among these young men arose the Venezuelan Illich Ramírez Sánchez, who would make himself famous under the pseudonym of "Carlos."

If Colin Smith had reconstructed Ramírez Sánchez within the milieu that bred him—those South American settlements in Paris, London, and Moscow—the character would probably be more believable than the one who appears in Mr. Smith's book, *Carlos: Portrait of a Terrorist.* Instead, we have the impression of detective stories and spy movies (perhaps most specifically the James Bond movies) as the backdrop and the unconscious context for this biography. Although it is clear to the reader that the feats referred to in his biography are real—killing, kidnapping, throwing bombs—the Carlos of this book has a stubborn air of unreality about him.

Undoubtedly, a contributing factor to this lack of reality is the difference between Carlos and the terrorists in fiction or the revolutionaries in political essays—the abyss that separates the man of flesh and bone from the characters to which books have accustomed us. Neither intellectual coherence nor ethical purity enhanced this chubby, petulant, fornicating youth, whose banality puts him closer to Musil's man without qualities than to Conrad's or Malraux's more modest brutes. Even when he shot the president of the Marks and Spencer store in London or when he directed the kidnapping of the OPEC ministers in

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Vienna, he seemed as unmotivated as when he was a colorless student at the Patricio Lumumba University in Moscow. Literature and politics so embellish the terrorist that it is hard work for us to recognize him in a mediocre man. And that human figure is what the testimony and the facts collected in this volume sketch: the portrait of a poor devil.

Nevertheless, this calamitous young man, this son of a Marxist millionaire lawyer, this listless fellow with a hearty appetite, this unlucky suitor of London girls, seems to have been capable one Sunday afternoon of calmly setting off a grenade at Le Drugstore on Saint Germain des Près (killing two people and injuring thirty-four) simply because the establishment's owner was a Jew.

The explanation proposed by Colin Smith is simple: the K.G.B. This lazy papa's boy had become the fearsome "Carlos" while he studied in Moscow, after which he had served as a Soviet agent in the most extremist Palestinian organization (George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) in whose ranks he was being converted into a terrorist star, second only to Leila Khaled. The K.G.B., like almost all secret agencies, undoubtedly uses for its own purposes fanaticism, madness, ingenuousness, and amorality (as well as generosity and nobility), but it does not manufacture these qualities. If indeed it was in Moscow, where he may have been persuaded by the K.G.B., that Illich Ramírez Sánchez decided to become a terrorist, we are still in the dark as to how it was possible for such an insignificant person suddenly to convert himself into a machine for kidnapping, extortion, and murder. Rather than trying to sketch the process of Illich Ramírez Sánchez's transformation into Carlos—an extreme and instructive case of what happened to others—Colin Smith has written a pleasant, superficial book, using the the known facts about what Carlos did as the basic ingredients for designing an *identikit* that is even something of a palliative since the story seems so unusual. *Portrait of a Terrorist* recounts some violent actions in which Carlos did not star—the slaughter at the airport in Lod, Israel, the seizing of the French embassy in The Hague and of the West German embassy in Stockholm—but these episodes appear in the book stripped of all sociological, ideological, historical, and cultural references, like a sequence of anomalies, a bundle of bloody, inexplicable curiosities.

This presentation makes Carlos unreal and falsifies the phenomenon of modern terrorism, whose manifestations are no mere product of chance, individual pathology, or the frustrations and impotence of certain groups of human beings.

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Hitler's Children, the book that novelist Jillian Becker has devoted to the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group in West Germany, is a serious attempt to present a synopsis of the facts and to describe the milieu in which the *Rote Armee Fraktion* arose. The author draws a lively picture of the student movement of the 1960s, which first consisted of a reformist effort to democratize and modernize the German university. Later, the movement became radicalized in its campaigns against the Vietnam war. Finally, through its solidarity with the Third World (the protest against the Shah of Iran's visit to Berlin was one of the root causes of student agitation), it ended in its most desperate groups with a total questioning of the system in Germany and it opted for the Great Refusal (following the formula of Marcuse, who was one of the movement's prophets at its beginning but who was later rejected by the most belligerent groups for being timid and bourgeois). The Baader-Meinhof group was briefly but intensely active: attacks on department stores, assaults on banks, sabotage of military centers, kidnapping, and murders. The principal members of the group, whose social origin and formation are well outlined in this book, were born into families of the middle and upper bourgeoisie, some of them within religious and intellectual circles. The most interesting personality is that of Ulrike Meinhof, who was imbued with theological concerns in her student days. She later became a successful journalist for a magazine (edited by her husband, the writer Klaus Rainer Rohl) that combined pacificism with pornography, and she then gave up a position of certain importance within the intellectual Left in order to devote herself to direct action. She ended by committing suicide in prison on May 9, 1976. The story of Ulrike Meinhof has much of the archetypal about it since the stages of her radicalization—that path leading from moral rebellion to the election of terror as a political strategy—are still being travelled by countless young people in the Third World.

Hitler's Children is an informative book, not an analytic one, and occasionally the reader is disturbed by the commentaries—ironies and sarcasms of sometimes doubtful taste—that accompany the facts. But her book contains valuable material for situating one of the most dramatic examples of contemporary terrorism in its proper context. Scattered throughout its pages, just as in the sensational chapters of Colin Smith's book, are more than sufficient facts for a conclusion that, nevertheless, neither of the authors formulates.

The acts of Carlos and the Baader-Meinhof group are strident expressions of a widespread phenomenon in contemporary political life: the corruption of the ends by the means used to achieve them. This

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is, of course, a very old story. The difference in our time is that the phenomenon has never been so widely recognized by so many people. The use of perverse methods in order to achieve their objectives has drawn together antagonistic ideological regimes to the point where they are virtually indistinguishable.

At the same time, the intellectual world of the Left suffers from a curious paralysis. Aware of the "structural violence" of exploitation, where small minorities live off the bulk of the population, or where rich countries benefit from poor, the leftist intellectual has concluded that it is reactionary or hypocritical to condemn the individual violence by which radical groups fight these wrongs. The case of Jean-Paul Sartre, who is mentioned in Jillian Becker's book, illuminates the attitude of the progressive intellectual face to face with terrorism. The most that this intellectual permits himself is disapproval of bombings, murder, kidnappings, and robberies as *mistaken and counter-productive* tactics. Which, from the moral point of view, is equivalent to saying that those actions are legitimate. Sartre gives an example: Didn't the resistance make use of these means to fight the Nazis? Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument establishes, first, that the end justifies the means and, second, that the morality or immorality of an act can be determined by its efficacy.

Because of the complicity or silence of the leftist intellectuals, the criticism of terrorism has become a monopoly of the Right, naturally adding to the prestige of "revolutionary violence" for the young nonconformists, who see those condemnations for what they usually are: crocodile tears. There have never been so many theoretical studies of ideologies, orthodoxies, and heterodoxies, as well as of the mythologies enveloping them. But what our epoch desperately needs is not so much study of contemporary political rhetoric (the "ends") as analysis of political conduct. The divorce between the one and the other is universal.

People like Carlos and Andrees Baader are examples of this divorce. Both are incapable of perceiving what the anarchist Ravachol (who threw a bomb into the Cafe de la Paix in Paris, shouting "No one is innocent!"), or the nineteenth-century Russian nihilists saw so clearly: violence is an *evil*—even though they resigned themselves to it as necessary. For this Venezuelan and this German, the bomb, the submachine gun, robbery, and murder offer themselves without complications, as if they were a banality or a sport. The use of violence, more than a method for achieving political ideals, becomes a duty. What it involves by way of risk, excitement, madness, or suicide attracts

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certain types of lives, discharges impulses and appetites that can be associated only arbitrarily with the revolutionary goal of transforming society. We already recognize one of the dangers in the notion that political objectives can be accomplished by imitating the actions of gangsters: a moral cover is provided for gangsterism and the ranks of the revolution are opened to delinquents. Mythified by the surrounding publicity and freed from ethical prohibition, political violence lends a hand to many people: it gives company to the lonely and entertainment to the bored, it compensates the frustrated and provides savage therapy for the neurotic. As technology produces ever more deadly and easily manipulated weapons, the destructive capability of terrorism advances without respite; through terrorism society may be effectively converted into what the defenders of violence say it already is: a jungle, a madhouse, or an inferno. Before this apocalypse, perhaps it would be worthwhile to ask, as Camus did in *L'homme révolté*, if any political practice that places abstract ideas above human life is admissible, and whether it is not the means that ought to justify the ends.

But that will not happen easily. At the beginning of the century, a determined partisan of violence, Georges Sorel, wrote in an essay on what he called "the catastrophic imagination of socialism": "*Il faut juger les myths comme des moyen d'agir sur le présent; toute discussion sur la manière de les appliquer matériellement sur le cours de l'histoire est dépourvue de sens.*" The myth he was referring to was the general strike, but his statement might be applied to the myth of revolutionary violence as a remedy for putting an end to reactionary violence. Experience proves that violence does not suppress previous violence but rather increases it. Furthermore, experience proves that to persevere in the belief in remedial violence is to push contemporary society toward final catastrophe. Nevertheless, the myth endures, fed by the despair of some people and the cowardice and ingenuousness of others, provoking throughout the world the slaughter of its daily hecatombs.

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

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FOUR NOVELS

A FAMILY ALBUM. By David Galloway. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $8.95.

VIOLET CLAY. By Gail Godwin. Alfred A. Knopf. $10.

ZIP. By Max Apple. The Viking Press. $8.95.

THE EIGHTH SIN. By Stefan Kanfer. Random House. $8.95.

David Galloway's *A Family Album* is impeccably organized around six photographs taken of some members of a southern family from 1912 to 1969. The snapshots appear on the dust jacket, and the novel's six sections are broken up into a description of the camera employed, a series of fictive observations about the photographer, and a close examination of the picture itself and the pasts of the individuals in it. Galloway is exhaustive in discussing what is visible and imaginative in making up what is not, and his prim, enticing, and well-made sentences suit his fastidious inquiries into the photographs and the dramas he invents to lie behind them.

Galloway loves details: he mines each photo for the minutest evidence that objects and gestures can give. His speculation about that evidence is neutral, meticulous, and intended to give the impression of facts beyond dispute and beyond the control of those people fixed forever in their destinies, of which the photos represent a cross section:

> His back and arms and legs are straight, and his general physical development accords in every way with the textbook standards for a boy of ten or twelve. If anything, his development—especially of the sexual organs—is slightly advanced for his age. He will eventually require the substitution of a tiny dacron sleeve for one section of his aorta, but this is in no way apparent in the study before us.

The more details that accumulate, however, the more the book becomes a monument to ingenuity rather than conviction. And the more it reveals itself as a tour de force the less we care and, perhaps worse, the less we believe. The biographies, related without dialogue, sound like mere gossip, lives overheard in a decadent southern atmosphere tinged with the odor of death and developer. Because the characters don't speak, the narrator is noticeably at the controls, and events, as a result, seem willed: disaster, when it strikes, does not thrill us with its inevitability but appears to be a nasty dig on the part of the author.

Paul Strand's dictum, that for a good photograph criticism is

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unnecessary and for a bad photograph it is boring, is applicable here. The novel is a dependent text, referring always to the dust jacket pictures, insisting that we look more closely at them, asserting that they deserve our attention. But after Galloway's strategies have been repeated three or four times we begin either to be bored by the pictures or to want to write our own book about them, since they are there for us to play with. People who like photography, antiques, genealogies, and body language may find things to savor in *A Family Album*, but on the whole it is dry and ingrown, all too obedient to, and even trapped in, its clever conception.

Gail Godwin's characters are also southern, and the heroine of *Violet Clay* is an illustrator of Gothic novels who specializes in the portrayal of fleeing heroines. Violet, fresh from a conventional marriage, goes to New York at the age of twenty-four to make her career as a serious painter, and drifts, like her young amiable Uncle Ambrose, who cannot seem to finish his second novel, into a deflected existence, mistaking her slide down the incline of time and circumstance for a smooth passage to better days and more profitable occasions. Violet spends nine years falling through her life until the loss of her job, and then the loss of her uncle, allow her to hit bottom and wake herself up.

Godwin has a knack for certain kinds of observation. She sees the ways in which women behave differently when they are with men; she sees the ways in which women subvert and smother their own ambitions. And she knows all the contemporary (and ignoble) manifestations of boredom, envy, social intimidation, loneliness, and procrastination—the last of which dominates her heroine's life.

A novel about procrastination, about a woman with inflated ideas about herself who at the same time doesn't take herself seriously enough, about a woman who lets time have its way while she sleeps away her destiny, a novel about a woman who is starting late, who gives herself an ultimatum and rises from her lethargy, who becomes wise about her demons ("little creatures like the ones in Bosch . . . those are somebody else's demons. They've already been given a shape. . . . Whereas, it is the nature of personal demons to be the last thing you imagine."), who gets her perspective and sense of proportion from relationships which are not romantic—is a novel worth having, and Godwin is canny enough to have chosen to write it.

Yet her management of these timely subjects is often clumsy enough to make us wince. Her plot creaks with the weight of her intentions, her transitions are awkward, and her characters, strained

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through the grid of her plan for them, are painfully thin. Violet's first person narrative—chatty, ironic, self-denigrating—is so wry that it nearly makes us indifferent to what happens, and we are grateful for the liberation from inertia that occurs at the end of the book, not so much because it provides an upbeat ending, but because it brings to a halt the grinding ironic tone of voice in which the book is written. It is only at the end, too, that Violet becomes believable as an artist. Until then her identity as a painter seems merely researched, and her career as an illustrator doesn't merit her anguish or our interest. In the last pages, however, as she lives out her ultimatum, taking the time and space to paint, Violet speaks about the painting process in a way that is plausible and attentive, giving herself instructions that Godwin herself might heed as a writer:

> She appears to be crafted out of the light, so continuously and harmoniously do the parts of her body mesh with its contours. And yet I need her outline, too. Otherwise it will be just blobs of light. . . . (Yet) the main thing is to get the model sketched in and then, quickly, over the pencil outline, try to capture those fugitive contours of light. Yes, leave out the book. That's too particular.

Zip: A Novel of the Left and the Right mates the schlemiel of the Jewish novel of the fifties with the whimsy and politics of the pop novels of the sixties and the result is a hybrid that should be palatable but is curiously uninteresting as an entire book. Ira Goldstein, young, not particularly bright, narrates the story, a first person wistfully retrospective address to the Puerto Rican middleweight fighter whose career he managed and who becomes a radical, denouncing the narrator and his country. Max Apple's astuteness about the complexities of political sentiments is visible in the book, but is not taken far. What he wants is a cartoon novel, a theme that's to be respected for its riffs and variations—appearances by Tom Hayden, Jane Fonda, J. Edgar Hoover, Howard Cosell, and a powerful grandmother who rasps through the book like a comic death rattle.

Apple is a very good writer, a funny writer, and at times that seems to be enough: the fountain of genial chicken-flavored speech is delightful, his imagination is rich, he tells us interesting little stories. Yet the telling is finally too flavored for anything but talk to matter; the characters don't mean anything to one another but only to the author, whose pleasure in them derives from his opportunity to use language on them:

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> I look at Hoover's unbelievable thickness. He looks like a small safe. Hoover looks at her and sees a generation of girls gone wrong—hair bobbing, sequined dresses, white slavery, convertible cars. He looks at her and sees real beauty hung openly like a side of beef in a cooler.

That is good, even wonderful, but these localized felicities don't accumulate to move or involve us. Apple wants to do standup comedy, that's his secret. He wants those one-liners ("To kiss her would be acupuncture."), those Yiddish cadences, those tics and nudges. And it would be a blessing to his readers if he would give them the *spritz* direct instead of asking his overworked plot and characters to carry his considerable wit around.

If Gail Godwin's *Violet Clay* leads a life in which nothing has happened, the hero of Stefan Kanfer's *The Eighth Sin* leads a life in which so much has happened that it is impossible to absorb it. A Gypsy, liberated from a Nazi concentration camp as a boy, mistrustful of language but inwardly articulate, Benoit Kaufman rules *The Eighth Sin* with his rich and relentless consciousness. Kanfer takes him from childhood to adulthood in chapters that follow Benoit's experiences as a young thief, serious artist, husband and father, and, intermittently, pursuer of Eleazar Jassy, Gypsy collaborator with the Nazis.

Kanfer scrupulously avoids exploiting Benoit's moral status as survivor of the camps, always moving one step ahead of easy sentiments and predictable allegiances. Benoit's first person narration is skeptical, ironic; he is a silent refuser of consolations and systems. Yet his irony doesn't undermine our interest or belief in him; on the contrary, his defensive wit is sympathetic, moral, intelligent, embedded deep in his character, plausibly sneering at times, yet not destructive. His skepticism is, in fact, a matter of tact, a way of minimizing his self-importance in the face of the large horrors he has witnessed. To comment on those horrors would be presumptuous and redundant, and Kanfer represents them in frozen italicized blocks inserted in the narrative at just the right moment; the documentary sources coolly indicated just below them:

> ITEM: The Germans began to kill the Gypsies. There were two houses full of Gypsies. They threw small children out of high windows onto the cobblestones and there was a lot of blood.
>
> J. Fikowski, *Ciganie na polskich drogach* (Cracow: Wyd/Literackie, 1965)

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There are some things wrong with *The Eighth Sin.* The stereotyped Mordecai, elderly spreader of Yiddish ("All else fell before Mordecai's will. . . . The French launderer had a sign: *shmatte* in by 12:00, out by 6:00."), is more like a bit than a characterization. And the ending of the book scuttles its own seriousness at the last moment, allowing a two-ton coincidence to sink its subtlety. Yet the intelligence behind this novel is alive and impressive. There is a range of reference and breadth of perception which gives a rich texture to Benoit's complex thought processes and offers serious readers the air they deserve to breathe. Like *A Family Album, The Eighth Sin* has a design, a chapter apiece assigned to the seven deadly sins, but unlike *A Family Album,* the design in this case is so fully absorbed by the story that we digest it rather than refer to it as a frame; it is a sophisticated, natural, and important scheme. *The Eighth Sin* is about important things, and the author not only respects his subject but is equal to it. He is a writer in whom thought, feeling, wit, and conscience are highly evolved, the only writer of these four who combines a passion for exactness of language with the passion to bear witness to the truth.

LYNN LURIA-SUKENICK

TWO WOMEN

ELEANOR MARX. By Yvonne Kapp. Pantheon. Volume I, $10. Volume II, $17.95.

THE DIARY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF. Volume I: 1915–1919. Edited by Anne Olivier Bell. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $12.95.

A MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS. By George Spater and Ian Parsons. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $12.95.

Virginia Woolf liked to juxtapose pairs of figures in her critical essays: Maria Edgeworth and Laetitia Pilkington, Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth. What would she have made of the parallels between her own life and that of a woman as different in her origins, temperament, and achievement as Eleanor Marx? Though they walked the same London streets and knew some of the same people—Shaw, Beatrice Webb, Edward and Constance Garnett—it comes as a surprise to learn that one life sketch could serve for either.

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"As a young girl, 'X' fought bitterly with the father she alternately worshipped and resented, and to whose library she owed her freedom from the ignorance to which most women of her time were condemned.

"She married at about thirty, having lost both parents, and remained childless by choice; her maternal feelings were lavished on the children of a beloved older sister. She was a socialist and a feminist, but considered herself primarily a creative artist.

"She suffered periods of severe mental illness, triggered by doubts about the value of her creative work; her symptoms included self-starvation, hallucinations, and suicidal depression. Before her final, successful suicide attempt, she indicated in a note to her life companion that her death was to be attributed to love."

Beyond these resemblances, Virginia Woolf and Eleanor Marx now have in common the fact that virtually every scrap of information relating to either is available for scrutiny by a women's movement that is bound to read such lives as exemplary. Yet the differences outweigh what may after all be coincidental similarities of plot. For Woolf was one of the great creative artists of her age; and Eleanor Marx, though she was a woman of unusual gifts of mind and spirit, never achieved her fairly modest dreams. (She believed she could act—"I *can* move an audience—and that is the chief thing"—and there is a poignant letter from her sister Jenny, burdened with a loutish husband and five children, congratulating her on choosing "the only free life a woman can live—the artistic one.") Her importance, as Yvonne Kapp argues in a readable, meticulously researched biography, lay in her work for international socialism and for the British labor movement. Her numerous translations (notably *Madame Bovary*, and two Ibsen plays) have been superseded, and her political pamphlets and speeches were in their nature ephemeral. As the women's movement digs for heroines, it will be interesting to see whether her life and work come to seem of permanent significance.

It is easy to imagine Virginia Woolf summing her up in a few finely chiselled paragraphs. No doubt she would fasten on her sadness, so plainly to be seen in the frontispiece to volume two of Kapp's biography, and in her letters to her half-brother Freddy Demuth, Karl Marx's unacknowledged son by his housekeeper. And certainly she would note her Jewishness. ("I do not like the Jewish voice," Woolf wrote in her *Diary* after a visit from her sister-in-law. "I do not like the Jewish laugh . . . I think Jewesses are somehow discontented.") And she would set in her own detached perspective the politics that were Eleanor Marx's lifeblood. Here is Woolf on a suffrage rally held in

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1918, twenty years after Eleanor Marx's death: "The hall was fairly well filled; the audience almost wholly women, as the speakers were too. The pure essence of either sex is a little disheartening. Moreover, whether it's a meeting of men or of women, one can't help wondering why they do it. I get one satisfactory thrill from the sense of multitude, then become disillusioned, finally bored and unable to listen to a word."

Certainly "Tussy," as she was known to her family, seems to have shared the Marxs' political passions from early childhood, when she espoused Irish Fenianism—"eine Politikerin von top to bottom," according to her mother. There were three gifted daughters, each in turn a devoted secretary and helpmeet to the father whom they adored, and whose need for help was bottomless. Eleanor was the youngest, born in London in 1855; and the only one to live her adult life in England. After Marx's death she became a respected figure in the workers' movements of the eighties and nineties, and was idolized by the poor of London's East End, among whom she rediscovered her Jewish blood, identifying herself with the most oppressed of peoples, and with the Trier rabbis from whom Marx was descended.

While socialism inevitably was the center of her life, her secret passion was for the stage. Her father read *King Lear* with his daughters; her mother wrote articles on the London theatrical season for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Tussy took acting lessons and performed with amateur groups; she often ended her speeches to the workers of Liverpool or Birmingham with a recitation of Nora's final scene in *A Doll's House*.

It was possibly her love of the stage that drew her to Edward Aveling, a popularizer of Darwin and a notorious atheist, also known as an actor and playwright under the name "Alec Nelson." In 1884, a year after her father's death, she announced to family and friends that she and Aveling (who was previously married) had decided to live together as man and wife. They were now jointly to carry the banner of Marxian socialism in England, mediating under Engels's protective guidance between the continental parties and various English groups—the Social Democratic Federation, William Morris's Socialist League, the Independent Labour Party, the "New Unions" of the unskilled. They toured America twice, addressing enthusiastic public meetings organized by local socialist clubs; in London their work was dominated by the campaign for a legal eight-hour day. At its height this movement generated massive May Day demonstrations in the central squares of every major city in Europe and America; the 1891

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Trafalgar Square demonstration seemed to Engels to signal the beginning of the socialist revolution in Britain. But with a few years the "popular front" of revolutionary socialists, democratic socialists, anarchists, trade unionists, and feminists, broke down in sectarian squabbles. Aveling dissolved his Legal Eight-Hours League in 1895, and he and Tussy threw in their lot with the SDF, from which they had resigned over issues of personality and principle ten years before.

It is hard to accept Kapp's analysis of the Avelings' bewildering shifts in party allegiance during these years, though only one British reviewer, the historian E.P. Thompson, has challenged her account—perhaps because to most readers it all seems like ancient history. But Kapp's spirited defense of Eleanor Marx's political acumen reads suspiciously like special pleading. A 1967 biography of Eleanor Marx by Chushichi Tsuzuki (covering much the same material) was subtitled "A Socialist Tragedy," a notion Kapp firmly opposes, urging rather that Eleanor Marx's life was happy, fulfilled, busy above all, and that her suicide is to be attributed to her sense that British socialism had failed to take the correct turning. She had done all she could; her message had gone unheeded, and so she was ready—at forty-three—to die.

But surely her death, if not a socialist tragedy, was a human tragedy, a pointless waste of ability, energy, love. It is hardly a coincidence that she identified with Ibsen's heroines, trapped by their circumstances, their marriages, their own passions. Indeed, what comes across most powerfully from Kapp's day-by-day reconstruction of the life is not the achievement, but the desperate struggle to keep afloat. There was ill-paid teaching, hack work at the British Museum (her chief employer was a "Miss Zimmern," probably the Helen Zimmern whose name appears on two dozen anthologies, biographies, and translations published in the eighties and nineties, several of which Eleanor Marx must have ghosted), and typewriting for more successful novelist friends like Olive Schreiner. The struggle for work was made more bitter by Aveling's infidelities, his drinking, his carelessness with other people's money. Yet she was bound to Aveling by their common propaganda and organizational work; they were delegates to the same international conferences, sat on the same executive boards, spoke to the same workers' clubs.

Did she in fact have an unerring instinct for "true" socialism, as Kapp argues—or was she simply following her father's dicta, as laid down by Engels? Conditions in England in the nineties were different from those Marx documented from Blue Books in the fifties and sixties;

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the human conditions Eleanor Marx observed among the dockers, the women strikers of the Silvertown rubber works, the East End poor, urged her to immediate, practical reforms. But just as she was unable to break off with Aveling, she seems never to have considered modifying the "hard line" Engels and Aveling espoused. And gradually she lost her closest English friends—Shaw, the novelist Clementina Black—to Fabianism, the modified, meliorist socialism that Engels was so contemptuous of, and that was to become the dominant English tradition. The saddest thing about Eleanor Marx's last years, after Engels's death in 1895, is her isolation. "I think I live more in the past memories of my dear ones than in present things," she wrote her father's old friend Wilhelm Liebknecht. The work was endless—the meetings, lectures, tours—but her life had no vital center.

Where Eleanor Marx was cursed in her choice of a mate, Virginia Woolf seems to have been singularly fortunate. Leonard Woolf left the Civil Service when he married Virginia, to become, like her, a free-lance writer (best known for his Fabian policy papers); he comes through both the *Diary* and *A Marriage of True Minds* (a by-product of the vast editing industry now under way at the University of Sussex and the New York Public Library) as a kind of saint. To Virginia he was "doctor, nurse, parent . . . and chief literary adviser"—that is, the Compleat Husband in all senses but the usual one. (Virginia, after an amiable try at marital relations, which she seems to have found quite baffling, settled for separate beds, then separate bedrooms, and brief romances with women friends.)

A Marriage of True Minds offers new letters between Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf, statistics on the Woolfs' annual budget for food, servants, clothes, and travel, and an impressive collection of photographs in which the pre-Raphaelite Virginia comes to look more and more like the craggy Leonard. But there is nothing new or illuminating in the account of the marriage, and the authors' prose is really unworthy of their subject, even as gossip: "Virginia was not the typical fidgety introvert."

In this first of a projected five volumes of the *Diary*, on the other hand, none of the gossip, personal or social, matters. This is a writer's diary, an exercise book in which immaculate prose is fitted to the most precise observation and analysis; on rereading, it comes to seem a person, "with almost a face of its own," Woolf notes with pleasure. She had the freedom that goes with great gifts, that intensity of need that others instinctively make space for, serve, sacrifice their lives to. "What I wonder constitutes happiness?" she writes. "I daresay the most

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important element is work." This is what Karl Marx believed ("Without work a man is no more than an ox."), and probably it is what Eleanor Marx believed ("I think I could do something. . . . The chance of independence is very sweet."). But Eleanor Marx's work, dictated by financial need or by the demands of others, was in the end not enough to validate her life.

Neither was Woolf's work a sufficient safeguard. But whatever the immediate cause of her suicide, there seems no lack of achievement in the life itself. Eleanor Marx seems never to have had that consolation. She was driven to take her life by the discovery that Aveling, whose first wife had died some years before, had secretly married a young protegee who had been performing with him at socialist benefits. This outrageous gesture (for he married under his stage name) was preceded by several attempts to break away; and whether he was held by illness or lack of money, Tussy herself seems to have made frantic efforts to keep him. The marriage was the final evidence of her desertion; it must have set off overwhelming terrors of abandonment, convictions of worthlessness, of being "unlovable." Yet one wonders whether her unquestioning allegiance to her father, her role as a spokesman for international Marxism, according to Kapp her chief strength, was not at the root of her emotional dependence on Aveling. She never really struck out on her own, intellectually or emotionally; she was unable to free herself from guilt at her father's death, unable to face the truth of Aveling's character.

Five-volume diaries and thousand-page biographies inevitably raise questions about the intrinsic interest of the life thus minutely unrolled to view. How are we to assess the lives of these two women? Woolf's stature as an artist is assured; her influence on twentieth-century literature as a critic and stylist is substantial. But above all her writing gives pleasure. She went about London in the years of the First World War "making up phrases and incidents to write about," and it is for the beautifully turned phrase, the flashing perception, that we read the *Diary*. "The West End of London fills me with aversion; I look into motor cars and see the fat grandees inside, like portly jewels in satin cases. . . . The afternoons now have an elongated pallid look, as if it were neither winter nor spring. . . . It struck me that age consists not in having a different point of view, but in having the same point of view, faded."

Where does Eleanor Marx's interest lie? Her dedicated work in the British labor movement hardly altered the course of labor history; and her own brand of socialism lost out in England to the work of the

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Webbs and Shaw. Inescapably, as Kapp admits, her chief interest lies in her name and heritage. It also lies in her personal tragedy, in the exemplary nature of her struggles and aspirations. It is the same pattern we find in the lives of other emancipated women fifty and one hundred years earlier—Charlotte Brontë, Mary Wollstonecraft—the soul-destroying struggle to find work, the determination to be useful, the longing for artistic fulfillment, the bitter and probably unresolvable conflict between love and work. Her pamphlets and speeches are not really memorable; the letters have pathos without telling us a great deal about the writer. But the story is a highly interesting one, and well deserves the close, loving scrutiny that Kapp devotes to it.

JUDITH CHERNAIK

MOSTLY MUSIC

CURRENT CONVICTIONS. By Robert Craft. Alfred A. Knopf. $12.50.

Finishing Robert Craft's most recent book, one is inspired to ask the simple question—"What is a Book?"—much in the spirit of Tolstoy's "What is Art," out of uneasiness with what one has just been through. Like any group of essays which have appeared elsewhere (all but two in Craft's *Current Convictions* were published in *The New York Review of Books* between 1974 and 1976), the logic of the book and the coherence of the essays one to another require resolution if the essays *qua* book are to be readable or useful as a whole or in part. Ostensibly, Craft's new volume is about music and composers, mostly about opera, for the first half deals with Mozart, his operas, Wagner, Verdi, and Richard Strauss. All but the last third is devoted to nonoperatic composers—Ravel, Liszt, Schoenberg, and Ives. The end of the book has no thread, and is a potpourri of essays, about Craft's watching Mary Hartman, Craft's journey to Walt Disney World, Craft's hernia operation, Craft's corrections of Eliot's punctuation, Craft's view of the concept of time, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann, Edvard Munch, and Hegel. In short, this book is either for music lovers or Robert Craft devotees.

The discussion of Mozart, with which the book starts is typical of the problems with Craft's writing about music. Perhaps as a result of

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The New York Review format, all five essays on Mozart are diffuse. There is little discussion of the musical text, of the scores, or of the libretti in detailed structural terms. At best, the "effect" of works in a general way is discussed, for example, how effective a drama a particular opera is. As a result, the essays do not bring the reader into contact with the actual music in question. Many of these essays have a dual character, as trenchant reviews of recent concerts or books on the one hand and as serious forays into the deeper significance of Mozart's work on the other. As reviews of concerts, they fail to convey enough descriptive detail to make any sense to the reader who happened not to have been present at the concerts in question, unlike George Bernard Shaw's criticisms of London musical life or Edward Hanslick's reviews from Vienna. Reading these pieces is somewhat like being a third party to a conversation at an after concert reception where two people are arguing about the performance which one missed. Craft attempts to ridicule Harold Schoenberg, music critic of *The New York Times*, in one essay, but in a polemical manner without enough description of the source or the occasion of Craft's objections. Despite Craft's acerbic and sarcastic tone, all one has gathered at the end of that particular essay is that the two men responded differently to a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Finally, despite Craft's self-conscious attempt at demonstrating his imaginative perception as a spectator, the implications behind the choice of the particular concerts he chooses to review fail to become clear. Why, beyond mere jealousy, spend two pages on a Salzburg Festival poster featuring a picture of Leonard Bernstein in tails?

Craft's criticism and analysis of music, apart from particular performances, the analytical dimension of his essays, lack a direct systematic or detailed attitude to the music itself. Craft has a strong attraction for bizarre counter-factual hypotheses; about whether music would have been different if Mozart had never lived (he thinks not), about what Mozart's health as a young boy would have been like had he not travelled so much, and the like. Such questions have merit at the levels of careful argument, not as rhetorical substitutes. Craft has little idea about disease and health of children in the eighteenth century, and displays a strange case of ahistorical arrogance. He is forever rendering modern psychological judgments about composers. For example, in Mozart's case, the Countess in *Figaro* is the mother Mozart never had, his "juvenile" jokes in adulthood (to others, his marvelous sense of humor) were the result of the pressures of youth, and his scatological letters are partly a response to too frequent separations from his mother

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and the fact that Papa Leopold overshadowed Mama Mozart. Craft adduces no evidence and glibly drops these "new" perceptions. As a result, Mozart is trivialized, and no plausible insight is revealed, either about Mozart (since no scholarship is brought to bear on Craft's claims) or about his music. Craft tries to explain the "weakness" in Mozart's command of the fugue in relation to his "abnormal" childhood, but the result is unconvincing because the musical argument is fragmentary. The discussion of fugal writing in Mozart, of which examples abound, might be most interesting and might reveal an aspect of Mozart's psyche, but Craft would have had to substitute specificity for polemic to achieve that end. Likewise, Craft treats Ravel's music as a predictable consequence of Ravel's childhood psychological development without sufficient discussion of the music itself.

More troublesome is that Craft displays facile assumptions about the historical development of music. He shares the popular idea that one work of a composer prefigures or anticipates a later one, that one style breeds the next, that Mozart, for example, "already felt emotions later associated with nineteenth-century romanticism." This pseudo-Hegelianism permeates his discussion of Verdi, Liszt, and Strauss, who are evaluated in a context of the development of musical style that is in the framework of standard music history college texts which view the evolution of music in progressive terms. Dubious claims of this variety abound, such as "the songs Strauss wrote at the end of his life . . . could have been written nearly a century before." By what bizarre criteria of personality or history? Related to the use of this simple evolutionary assumption is Craft's static conception of "the good opera" and the "ideal" libretto. Craft seems intent to display how masterpieces like *Don Giovanni*, *Electra*, *Falstaff*, *Aida*, and *Salome* could have been improved. These works are not sacred, for sure, but such an approach bears a burden of a well-developed platonic view of drama and audience response and a cogency of argument which Craft fails to sustain.

What marks this book is the simple fact that Craft is a man of very strong opinions. He criticizes Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky, he dismisses Hugo von Hofmannstahl's version of *Electra*, and condescends to Richard Strauss's orchestral music, not to speak of Liszt's later works, or Kierkegaard's analysis of *Don Giovanni*. His strong opinions are not argued but rather asserted, as if perhaps eloquence alone legitimates our reading them. In those cases where Craft attempts a defense, his scholarship and breadth of reading are insufficient. For

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example, he does not seem to comprehend Hofmannstahl's *fin de siècle* aesthetic universe or intellectual development. He considers it sufficient to use Greek tragedy itself (whatever that might be) as the criterion for condemning Hofmannstahl's particular revision of the Electra legend. Likewise, he takes Kierkegaard entirely out of Kierkegaard's own context and treats him as if he were just another critic who had published a review of *Don Giovanni*.

The result is that within the entire series of essays on music little is learned except that Charles Rosen's book on Schoenberg is excellent, which it is, and that when Solti performances were ragged it was because of acoustics at the Metropolitan Opera, and when James Levine's were, it was Levine's own fault. Craft's choice of detail to support his contentions is haphazard. Chancing to see a manuscript on exhibit in Basel on a trip and using it as evidence of a major point on Mozart's writing (without further research) is, for example, hardly enough basis for the kinds of odd claims Craft likes to make.

The nonmusical essays also suffer from the faults of facile critical slaps, unravelled intellectual assumptions, and trivial assertions couched in overwritten prose. Sometimes, as in his essay on time, Craft is entirely out of his depth, not even aware of philosophical and historical work (Foucault, Pocock, E.P. Thompson, etc.) on the subject. As a consequence, his essay is neither synthetic or perceptive. Craft's attempt to demolish Eliot on the basis of his punctuation is just short of ridiculous. Nothing is said about Eliot's substance, only about Eliot's misuse of the semicolon and other grammatical minutiae. Craft is generally merciless about writing, as might have been adduced initially from the fact that the book's preface expresses gratitude to his past English teacher. But Craft's objections are school marm pedantry, and a bore to boot. Craft has the habit of taking some author's understandable but perhaps a bit ambiguous paragraph and digging in it to find egregious errors in language and logic. The errors he finds, as in Alan Jefferson's work on Strauss (which is not distinguished), and in Charles Taylor's on Hegel (which is much more), remind one of a student who has to write a paper but hasn't had time to read the book or do research. He flips to what appear to be easy targets on the grounds of some slight, often irrelevant, ambiguity in language. Craft himself employs a pretentious prose, full of turns of phrase which are hardly exemplary, like "a Xerox of a march theme" and "plushy upholstered . . . idioms" (done at Gimbels?), or this stellar example of vague ideas and unexamined philosophical assumptions lodged in turgid prose:

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> But arts, philosophies, and religions are escape hatches of another order, leading to their own realities. In a dualistic system (a structure of reality and a structure of mind), man, the alien in a pre-existing temporal-spatial continuum, was forced to invent phenomenological time, and to measure it in the reality of his own nature—until the escape into "change-independent" subjective time becomes the escape from "temporal existence" into "eternity," when, as the Angel says in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, "There shall be time no longer."

All these essays, however glib and superficial (they often end abruptly with general platitudes or appended musings unrelated to the subject of the essay), might be interesting and lend themselves to a book if Craft, with his intellect and wit was, in and of himself, compellingly interesting. He seems not to be, as the pieces on Walt Disney (he does not like pop culture) and the hernia operation (he does not like hospitals) best indicate, even though the pieces on Mann, Aldous Huxley, Schoenberg, and "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" have a worked-out argument and are perceptive. They strike one as having been more carefully crafted. Craft does not command the stature of his mentor Stravinsky, whose mere assertion of strong opinion, without explanation, was cause enough for attention and interest.

The failure of this book is not a failure of ability or even knowledge on Craft's part. The most disappointing element is that Robert Craft has the skill, musical distinction, wit, and critical intelligence to offer music criticism to the generally educated reader that is perceptive regarding not only music, but the links between music, cultural and social history, philosophy, and psychology. The interpretive bridge between the culture in general and music, in history and in our own time, needs to be constructed, and few have command of both the necessary tools of the language of music and an insight and concern for the general culture. Robert Craft has this command and he should produce serious criticism, either in essay or book form, but not in the form of the essays in *Current Convictions*.

In his essay on Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Craft raises obliquely the issue of what the value of verbal descriptions of music might be. This is ironic, for much of his *Current Convictions* is devoted to describing music and its performance in words, without the assistance of printed musical notation. It seems clear that Craft would like to bring music, through words, into clearer focus in relation to the way we regard the past, the present, and the future, in music, in society, and in art. Unfortunately, *Current Convictions* is evidence exclusively of Craft's ambition, ability, and apparent desire to do so, and not more.

LEON BOTSTEIN

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RANKE'S HISTORY

RANKE: THE MEANING OF HISTORY. By Leonard Krieger. University of Chicago Press. $23.

Readers of the vicious (and fatuous) review of Leonard Krieger's *Ranke* in the *Times Literary Supplement* (6 January 1978) will be surprised to learn that this is not such a bad book. Krieger possesses considerable powers of conceptual analysis which surely compensate—in this book as in Krieger's earlier *German Idea of Freedom*—for his abstractness and stylistic deficiencies. Krieger is one of the very best intellectual historians in America precisely because he can manipulate ideas. Here he concentrates upon Ranke's progressive reconciliation of his enduring affection for "individuals," documents, and the particular in history, and his spasmodic compulsion to treat general questions, progress, and even world history. This, of course, is the classic problem of historicism which Friedrich Meinecke posed and thought he had solved in *Die Entstehung des Historismus*. On this general theme Krieger has written a chronologically ordered series of chapters tracing Ranke's intellectual development through his successive books, referring all the while for corroboration of his hypotheses to Ranke's methodological pronouncements, lectures, articles, and letters. The evidence consulted is thus quite comprehensive, but the focus is limited to the tension between the particular and the universal in Ranke's history. In fact Krieger forthrightly states that "this is not the full-dress biography or the complete historiographical study of Ranke that has so often been called for."

In support of his argument about Ranke's historicism, Krieger has nevertheless admitted two subordinate agenda to the book: in each chapter he discusses Ranke's professional and social arrangements and muses about his relationship to political personalities and circumstances; and he provides a minimum of information about Ranke's personal life. *Ranke* could not be anything like Ranke's own *History of Wallenstein*, for as Krieger points out, Ranke led a most uneventful life. He did hobnob with kings of Prussia and Bavaria, however, and for a time he frequented the salons of Rahel Varnhagen and Bettina von Arnim. He came from a family of Lutheran pastors, married late, and lived an aescetic life of scholarship. Krieger informs us of all these things, as well as of Ranke's research trips and other miscellanea, but

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only insofar as they bear upon the tension between the particular and the universal in Ranke's history.

Krieger's stinginess with social and psychological context is not merely a practical matter of having to select some things and leave out others. It is part of his argument. His psychological argument, for instance, is that the historian Ranke completely absorbed the personal Ranke: "the record confirms the manifest picture of a Ranke who organized his private life in such a way as to absorb his problematic personal drives and to create a respectable foundation for the untrammeled pursuit of scholarship." Besides being nothing new in Ranke scholarship, this lay diagnosis of "sublimation" explains nothing. It does get Krieger past some of the more obvious pitfalls of psychobiography. More significantly, however, it seems to make further biographical information superfluous.

The suppression of social and political context is more problematic. The book jacket is decorated with the famous portrait of the elderly Ranke bearing his two great medals of nobility, but Krieger does not mention that Ranke was ennobled in 1865 (or why). He treats Ranke's lectures to Maximilian II of Bavaria on modern history exclusively for the light they shed on Ranke's own struggle to appreciate the relationship between the vantage point of the historian rooted in the turmoil of present politics (this after 1848) and the historical past which he hoped to portray objectively. Ranke's position as official Prussian historiographer, his writings on Prussian history, indeed his relationship to Prussia generally, receive attention only as background to the tension in Ranke's writing between national and universal history. Likewise with Ranke's polemical political activity as editor of the *Historisch-politische Zeitschrift*. Thus an eminently political historian is presented here "with the politics left out." The effect of this can only be to counter the arguments of scholars like Georg Iggers and Hayden White, to name only two Americans, who have demonstrated the reactionary implications of Ranke's historical writing.

Even more disturbing, Krieger omits the most important intellectual context of his problem: historicism. He says in the preface that the great tradition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in German historical writing "was irrelevant, for he [Ranke] considered his approach to universal history to be idiosyncratic." This is hardly a substitute for an analysis of whether this is in fact the case, which is doubtful. Krieger ignores not only Ranke's predecessors, but virtually all of his contemporaries among historical writers as well: not a word of comparison with Michelet, Macaulay, Tocqueville, or Burckhardt,

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or even with Droysen or Treitschke. And with a disparaging remark about Walter Scott, he skips over the historical novel too. In fact, he ignores historicism as a secular movement altogether.

How is this possible in a book devoted to the fundamental problem of historicism in the work of the archetypical historicist? The answer lies in Krieger's desire to re-rehabilitate Ranke. Meinecke attempted this in 1936 when he appended his eulogy of Ranke to his book on historicism, saying that historicism "in the good sense" had culminated in Ranke. At that time Ranke had to be rescued from a reputation of vulgar positivism. He was famous throughout the world as a critic of documents, devoted to excavating facts and writing history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen.*" Meinecke argued correctively that Ranke had never lost sight of general questions, not even in his earliest books, and that he was the supremely empathic historian who had infused spirit into all he studied. In the same vein Meinecke defended Ranke from those who asserted that he had ignored social and cultural life in favor of a too exclusive concern with politics. But he did not feel obliged to defend Ranke's peculiarly German ideology of the nation state—first because this ideology had not yet been widely impugned, and second because Meinecke shared it to a considerable degree. (Meinecke had a change of heart after the experience of the Third Reich.) Concluding his preface to *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, Meinecke pointed out that this book was of a single piece with his earlier books, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* and *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte.* Krieger, on the other hand, like the rest of us, lives in a postfascist world and knows the objections which have been raised against Ranke's ideology all too well. He has, after all, written *The German Idea of Freedem*—a major liberal critique of German statism.

Ultimately Krieger's motive for rehabilitating Ranke is the same as Meinecke's. Meinecke wrote at a time when it had become popular to speak of "the crisis of historicism." The newly established social sciences had set out to discover general laws of society, irrespective of the national peculiarities so dear to the hearts of Ranke and the German historicists. Krieger similarly writes in the wake of the student movement of the 1960s when historians were called upon to defend the "relevance" of their discipline to contemporary social problems. He says as much on the first page of *Ranke* when he asks, as one of the two questions having given rise to the book, whether "in view of the current crisis of historical study, highlighted especially by consequent decline of interest in the schools [!], can we learn anything about

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possible meanings of history from what it has meant to men in ages more congenial to it?" He hopes to draw his affirmative answer to this question—for it is a rhetorical question—from the answer to his other question: how did the "father of modern scientific history" combine professionalism with "his life-long devotion to human values?" He answers these questions on a formal level: Ranke did, after years of groping, reconcile his passion for documentary research with the formal task of writing universal history. That Krieger does not concern himself with the ideology which informed Ranke's enduring urge to treat general questions merely indicates that he has a different set of values to defend. As a liberal in America in 1977, Krieger stands in the same relation to his society as Ranke did to his—a conservative one.

Ranke thus turns out to be a book of general interest in spite of its narrow substantive focus. Krieger writes to defend the role of history in general education, especially from the apostles of relevance. For this purpose it is a carefully conceived and well-executed piece of scholarship. It is even relevant. It might well serve the purposes of conservatives in the discussion over curriculum reform. It is especially relevant to the question of whether world history should not replace Western civilization in university curricula. But to accomplish his task, Krieger has had to disobey the first canon of historicism by suppressing the historical context of Ranke's work and concentrating upon the abstract rather than the concrete. This is an illuminating demonstration of how problematic the defense of "objective" professional history has become.

CARL PLETSCH

PILGRIM MOTHERS

ON KEEPING WOMEN. By Hortense Calisher. Arbor House. $9.95.
THE HIGH COST OF LIVING. By Marge Piercy. Harper & Row. $10.
I HARDLY KNEW YOU. By Edna O'Brien. Doubleday. $7.95.

The front cover of each of these novels features a woman's face. Its expression varies from Mona Lisa to sensitive Valkyrie to yielding vamp; the attached quantities of hair are correspondingly serpentine, helmet-like, and soft. Although the many faces of Eve compose an inevitable (or unavoidable) image of our time, the three

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authors under review (whose photographs adorn the back dust-jackets) seem to be peering into a mirror rather than holding it up to nature. Their failure to maintain the necessary emotional and artistic distance from their suffering, seeking protagonists, makes the reader an uncomfortable accomplice in narcissistic and claustrophobic rites.

On the surface, Hortense Calisher does most to equip her heroine's "voyage into the interior" with social, familial, and male perspectives. Lexie lies nude on the riverbank after a drunken party. Floating past on the stream of consciousness are her relationships with parents, brother, husband, other men, children, as she asks, "What do I want from the parliaments of the world?" Pursuing an answer to this portentous question, she has already tried everything from taking lovers to taking classes. The strongest element in the novel is a comic awareness, alas too flickering, of the absurdity inherent in a too deliberate quest. Lexie's brother, James, for instance, neatly clobbers a feminine poetic genre to which she shows dangerous signs of contributing: ". . . they'll hang their damp psyches out to dry anywhere." Lexie herself crisply severs her connection with a university seminar, in which unsatisfied women "are trying on life like a new hat" and writing essays on "whale chauvinism in *Moby Dick*." With continuing impartiality she quits the "cloisters of women"; conscientiously distinguishes between the personal and the female, the adventurous and the "erogenous"; concludes that "happiness is androgynous." Her husband, Ray, coming home from a transforming illness in Spain, is permitted his own rite (right?) of passage, while his biological disqualifications for undertaking it are sympathetically recognized: "Nor can one expect him to report himself with the exactitude that his wife reports herself."

Nevertheless, we can expect more exactitude from Ms. Calisher in the reporting of Ray (and in the grammar of that sentence) than we actually get. Ray, James, the class teacher Plaut, are not only seen as inadequate before Lexie's complexity, but inadequately seen in comparison with the loving attention lavished on each quiver of her psyche, not to mention other parts. Despite the flashes of wit and irony that lighten Lexie's obscure, tortuous search for an identity that will encompass body, mind, housework, work, motherhood (we're all behind you, girl), the humorless monstrosity of her concentration upon herself, and her creator's upon her, becomes more and more apparent:

> A pot of roses flowers between her legs, thorns and all. Far above it, eight feet taller and in another climate, floats that simpleton coco-

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> nut, her head. From behind her, the animal of herself jumps her, and clamps her waist, simian. A woman in rut evolves the history of primates, every time—with appropriate flora added. Yet the theory of evolution had to wait to be phrased by a long-celibate don. And the word "rut" comes from the stag. If there's no word direct for woman in this state must I invent one? A word takes its own time. Best to brood on it—on the state of me moving with my burden, into dock.

Best not to brood on it, really. (Several passages in *The High Cost of Living* and *I Hardly Knew You* display the same teeth-gritting anxiety to explore the female sexual response—surely by now a tourist resort rather than an uncharted hinterland.) The inappropriate stylistic flora with which Ms. Calisher embellishes something the Wife of Bath knew all about, point to the pervasive connection between overreaching and overwriting in this novel. She flogs to death the trick of the clinching dangler—"thorns and all," "her head," "simian," "into dock." (The last words of the book are "that sad jewel, joy," which repeats the construction of "that simpleton coconut," etc.) Her far-fetched images and conceits ("pot of roses," "coconut," "the animal of herself jumps her") try to look casual but shriek for applause. By the time Lexie finally rises from the riverbank, the rot or rut has gone far. Now earth-goddess, Magna Mater, Eve, she broods:

> Ah. Ahhhhhhhhh. I give birth to them. The women. Him. Awareness—it's the unnatural, natural act. And now—I bigger. I recover, from confinement. But—how to tell the story? of how people stammer in and out of the dark. In the fiery glades of the families.

Obvious points can speak for themselves; but "the fiery glades of the families" is a phrase whose linguistic melodrama puts out of court its own, and the novel's, pretensions to acquaintance with the night. It plays with fire.

Marge Piercy's drabber style comes as a relief, but only as that. It is in fact a shabby raincoat draping an equally naked romanticism:

> Leslie relaxed. She was ridiculous sometimes. Maybe it was the four months of working on the rape hot line right after she had come to Detroit. Black women, white women, old ladies, kids, all bleeding. Never again, she could not take it. She could not live with that knowledge of pain. Just to mind her own business and survive, somehow intact.

The off-the-peg clichés ("she could not take it," "survive, somehow intact") might seem to endorse Ms. Piercy's documentary earnestness

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and preoccupation with "contemporary reality" as touted by the blurb. Nevertheless, her prose has a bleeding heart.

The blurb also claims that the troubles of Leslie, lesbian, practitioner of karate, graduate history researcher, bear on "the issues that most intensely concern the people who live at the growing edge of our society." Unfortunately, *The High Cost of Living* reads more like a minority report from the margins, unaware of its own share in the pathos it evokes. Like Ms. Calisher's, Ms. Piercy's identification with her heroine makes overtures towards objectivity. She unclamps Leslie from the rape hot line to test her in the straight world and the academic rat-race. Leslie can be a stern critic of lesbian and feminist introversion. She condemns ex-lover Val's refusal of "real-world skills" and retreat into "a woman's theatre course" and "classes in palmistry and doily-making." Although Leslie's own pursuit of a further degree has tied her to the career of George, a high-grade academic rat (thus bringing about her separation from Val), a desire for intellectual integrity as well as economic independence drives her on. She rejects—or rationalizes her rejection by?—lesbian coupledom and community-living as personified by Tasha who runs the hot line and "the women's school":

> She wanted to live in Tasha's world only in her spare time. She got on her lovable small secondhand Honda, that ate up her extra pennies and made her feel good and headed for George.

The novel's somewhat outré morality makes it difficult to determine whether this represents compromise or triumphant accommodation on Leslie's part. Anyway, riding easily and gallantly into the uncertain future, with her black belt under her belt, she leaves behind as cloying a taste as any Ouida heroine—or hero. Earlier rhapsodies during a fleeting reunion with Val plumb the mawkish depths of the well of loneliness:

> Kitten Val. Stray kitten, sleek and pampered now. Val who had cried and cried. Who stared into the mirror with hungry eyes and turned away pouting, sulking. . . . This child on speed at seventeen, straight again by nineteen. This baby born again crying at Leslie's breasts.

Leslie's other key relationships, with teenage ingénue Honor and gay Bernard, are a little more coolly but too programmatically conceived, as if computer-selected to broaden her horizons ("suppose I told them my best friends in Detroit are a straight woman and a man"). The working-class or deprived origins of all three receive an unconvincing stress—Leslie is "car-poor," Bernard obliged to steal or to live parasiti-

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cally. The ever-informative blurb tells us that Leslie is "modeled on the governess heroines of nineteenth-century fiction," Honor a "beautiful low-born innocent putting on absurd high-born airs." But the points of the unlikely triangle hardly connect on this or on any other basis. Bernard divulges his unhappy childhood to Leslie and they briefly "straighten" each other out. Leslie hovers platonically over Honor until her symbolic name loses its aptness, and then steps in to moralize. Only the story of Leslie and Val, perhaps the real germ of the novel, has the touch of living if excessively pulsating flesh. Other characters may be filling in time and space for Ms. Piercy, as they do for Leslie, who does somehow persuade us of her own existence, if of little else. Certainly not that the karate class she agrees to take for the women's school attractively prefigures the shape of things to come. Although, by holding hands at the start, Leslie's lady-students break sweetly with the "ritual that men have developed," and a karate chop must be saluted as more positive than palmistry, one senses Ms. Piercy's doctrinaire iron hand in the velvet glove.

To sum up the messages so far from these Pilgrim Mothers (and the novels are reducible to messages): Lexie wins through by accepting "that ultimate seriousness in which she's the full half of humankind"; Leslie firmly rejects half of humankind, but finds she can exploit it while working undercover for the daughters' revolution. Edna O'Brien's Nora, lacking American spunkiness, lets the side down. A loser from the start of the novel and of her life, she hangs out the dampest psyche of all. She speaks from a British prison cell that epitomizes the masculine harshness of a world that is putting her on trial for the murder of her young lover, a contemporary of her own son. *I Hardly Knew You* consists of the testimony she will not be allowed to give in the dock, and would be ruled out of court in any case. As Nora pleads for the fault being more in woman's stars than in herself, she takes us on the routine conducted tour of past life and loves. It is, however, difficult to accept that her panic-stricken smothering of Hart (symbolic name?), when he has an epileptic fit during love-making, is either interpreted or justified by her cruel treatment at the hands of father and husband.

Although the special pleading in this novel receives no critical check whatsoever, Nora's contrasting weakness for sons and lovers modifies the antimale bias, and evokes the more traditional novel of female sensibility usually associated with Ms. O'Brien. Being Irish as well as a woman has afforded her fiction with grounds for complaint that might be keenly felt by the most unliberated lady. (Ireland is less

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"the old sow that eats her farrow" than a male chauvinist boar trampling on a woman's emotional and sexual needs.) Other O'Brien works star the passive, masochistic waiter-by-the-telephone, and throw some genuine light on the vulnerability of woman in love (though twenty-watt when set alongside the classic illuminations of Jean Rhys). Thus Nora's mad crime and leaky apologia suggest that Ms. O'Brien is now trying to graft on a more explicit and contemporary kind of protest:

> Certainly I should have killed long ago. It was mere blunder and restraint that stopped me. Killed the mad father with the long gaitered shins, or the suffering mother whose insides I visualized as a bowl of surping and usurping blood.

The country girl has read Sylvia Plath, listened in on the rape hot line.

With increasing sophistication, Ms. O'Brien's characters and her style have dragged up their roots in the earthy sensuality which made her first two Irish novels so powerful. A potential Colette who dwindled into a Sagan, she is now flirting with a new fashion of writing whose crude violence disrupts the familiar plangency with which Nora mourns Hart. The novel does possess a certain cultural interest in that its doomed heroine introduces Irish martyrology to sexual politics, at some point on the spectrum between the liberal Ms. Calisher and the radical Ms. Piercy.

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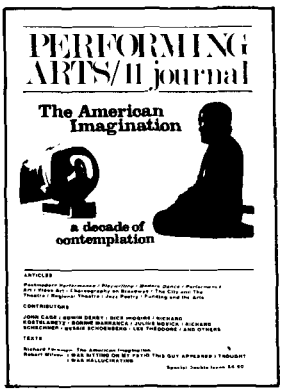

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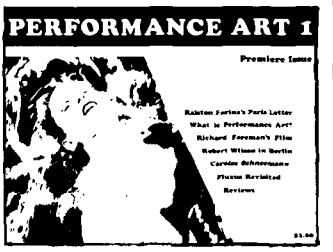

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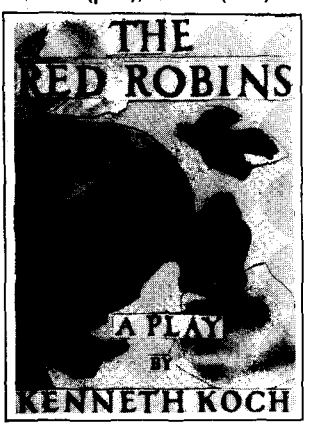

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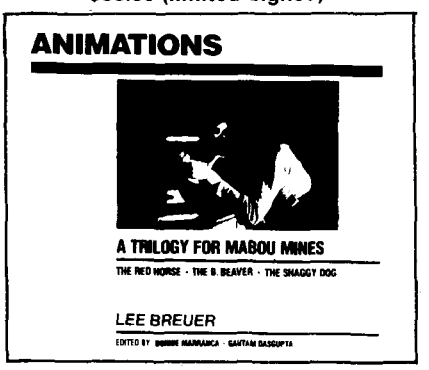

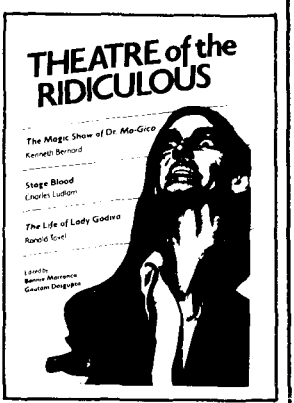

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WRITERS' CHOICE

DAVID IGNATOW: To discover a foreign poet of genius is exciting to one's own poetic ambitions and at the same time a comment on one's own nature and circumference. On the one hand the discovery leads to openings of the spirit until now unrealized as a result of ignorance or an aesthetic decision made long ago. On the other hand one is made to recognize oneself and one's own work that much more clearly for what it is. *Square of Angels, Selected Poems*, by Bohdan Antonych, exulting in its resonant folk imagery and metaphor, stirs one to think and to exult with it and to set oneself as poet in vibrant apposition to him. Antonych is deeply religious but also deeply skeptical. He taught himself to be closely identified with his roots in the back hills of the Carpathian mountains where he was born, in a small, obscure village that retained and even lived by its myths, legends, and pagan rituals through the Russian Revolution. Antonych's genius sprang into being as he turned to the culture of his birthplace during his years as a university student in the city of Lviv. It was a culture permeated with natural phenomena as seen through mystically ritualistic eyes and produced in Antonych powerful evocations of religious states of mind. But since he spent most of his mature life in Lviv, where he had educated himself, the first outpouring of his sensibilities began to be penetrated by the sights, sounds, and themes of city life, and it was the start of skepticism, even bitterness, that was as deeply felt as his earlier religious ecstasy. In short, his was the classic conflict between the past and the present, but its results in poetry were absolutely unique. Vast sounds of worship and awe rise from his poetry of the village in which he was born. The imagery is amazingly vivid, perhaps because of its strangeness to our modernized senses, but it is gripping, and then comes the imagery of the city, to which all of us of the city are accustomed, having grown hardened to it through weariness and anger with it. Antonych records it all in magnificent acerbic lines. He died in 1937, at the age of twenty-eight, at the opening of a great career.

I have put this book down time and again, refreshed in myself by the cleansing power of its spirit, even at its most bitter. The translations are by Paul Nemser and Mark Rudman with Bohdan Boychuk. The introduc-

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tion is by Bohdan Rubchak. The publisher is Ardis, Ann Arbor, Michigan. The book sells as a paperback at two dollars and ninety-five cents.

ROBERT PHILLIPS: One of the functions of art is to create order out of chaos. Much of today's prose and poetry, however, seem in themselves chaotic productions—works lacking in form, vision, control, clarity—and thereby failing to touch even the outer rims of my sensibility. Here are two books, one fiction, one poetry, which seem to marshal the events of decades into patterns which create shocks of recognition.

The Easter Parade, Richard Yates's fourth novel and fifth work of fiction (Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence) is a flawed but memorable and moving novel, one of the best I've read in years, and superior to his more recent, *A Good School*. In its depiction of the lives of the Grimes sisters—the name itself encompasses the grim and dirty lot which life is to hand them—Yates consciously or unconsciously writes a modern version of that 1908 favorite, Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, another fine novel of two sisters who look for a satisfactory existence in different locales. Bennett's Constance remains constant at home in the small town; his Sophia seeks sophistication in the big city. Yet in the end, Sophia must return to the roots of her existence. So too with Yates's Sarah and Emily. Sarah marries early, lives in a small town on Long Island. Emily works in an advertising agency in Manhattan, drifts from one unsatisfactory love affair to another. In the end, Emily sadly admits, "I'm almost fifty-years-old, and I've never understood anything in my whole life."

Yates's vision is uncompromising. Like a magnifying mirror, he exposes every pore. Indeed, there are a few too many greasy mouths, rotten teeth, sweaty armpits described in the book. *Nothing* is left to the imagination. Yates also loves irony too well. One cannot quite believe, for instance, that the book of a poet, Jack Flanders (one of Emily's philanderers), would be reviewed in the very same poetry roundup in the same paper with that of the one poet he had despised while teaching with him at Iowa, or that the critic would praise the rival poet as "audacious"—the favorite catchphrase of said poet, a phrase which particularly had grated on Flanders. It is all too neat, too patently ironic.

This is indicative of what is wrong with this otherwise fine novel. The entire performance is *too* cool, too perfectly realized,

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too "cooked" (as opposed to writings which are totally "raw"). Yet within its 229 pages Yates manages to convey the essentials of four decades in the lives of the Grimes sisters. His view is highly pessimistic, despite the novel's title (a title which should point toward hope, resurrection, immortality). Instead, everyone in the novel is thwarted. If the book is about "the collapse of the family in modern society," as the dust-jacket proclaims, it is also about the failure of the imagination. It is no accident that Sarah, Emily, and Jack Flanders are all incapable of completing their individual artistic projects. *The Easter Parade,* then, is about spiritual death, and in this sense its title is its first and final irony. It is a book which should teach those of us who write too much too fast how to sit and contemplate our novels.

William Heyen's *The Swastika Poems* (Vanguard) is one of those rarities, a book of poems which *is* a book, and not just a collection of picked-up pieces. Indeed, it could be argued that the book comprises a single long poem on an Aryan's contemplation of the Holocaust. Heyen's preceding book, *Noise in the Trees* (since expanded and released under the title *Long Island Light*), seemed modeled upon Lowell's *Life Studies,* with its two slices of related poems sandwiching a middle spread of prose. *The Swastika Poems* is similarly structured, though the prose is briefer and more objective. With the exception of a single phrase, "His birthday, his fifty-sixth/year to heaven" (which reeks of Dylan Thomas), Heyen hammers out a tough, strong book which is totally his own.

It obviously is a book which he was hurt into writing. Some of the World War II poems appeared originally in his first book, *Depth of Field,* published nine years ago and written even earlier. They are reprinted here, taking their place in the complete cycle—a cycle on the subjects of international and personal guilt, unjust causes, power, hope, faith. Born in Brooklyn of German parents, Heyen meditates on his German parents and in-laws, his Nazi uncles; on Hitler, Eva Braun, Goering, Eichmann; and on the ghosts of six million European Jews: "Though named for Wilhelm, your poet-brother,/I often curse the two of you and spend my hours/writing verses that wonder how your fiery,/German romanticism started,/And where, at last, if it did, it died."

Heyen displays true poetic gifts. In "Riddle," for instance, he uses rhyme to stunning effect,

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invoking Mother Goosery to counterpoint the very real horror of the refrain, "Who killed the Jews?" *The Swastika Poems* are often unbearable, as in "Blue" (about a truckload of burning babies); sometimes lyrical, as in the several Rilke imitations; and nearly always highly personal, as in the title poem and "A Snapshot of My Father, 1928." The confessional poems are unsparing, yet never sentimental. This lack of sentimentality or sensationalism, given the poems' subjects, is remarkable, a tribute to Heyen's control and skill. I regret the seemingly "easy" conclusion, that we *all* killed the Jews (a conclusion not at all arrived at easily, of course, as the whole of the book evidences—only seeming to be easy because the thought has been expressed by so many before).

Nevertheless, in a time when many of our poets are writing about bric-a-brac, or each other, William Heyen has attempted large historical and emotional subjects, taken many risks, and emerged through a corridor of flame to be seen as one of our most serious and accomplished poets.

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LETTERS

EDITORS:

Though I hesitate to seek space in your pages, I have a responsibility to correct a gratuitous slur in Jack Ludwig's recent review of James Atlas's biography of Delmore Schwartz, a book which has earned much praise from other critics. Mr. Ludwig spends almost a page recounting an incident when Delmore Schwartz and I and our wives were living in a series of contiguous small houses, along with a neighbor whose mattress once caught on fire. When it was put out in front of the Schwartzs' house, it burned an oblong aperture into the winter snow. Mr. Atlas chronicles, and Mr. Ludwig repeats, that I referred to the spot as "Delmore's grave."

This is quite true; but I must confess that I had forgotten the incident and the expression until I read about them in Mr. Atlas's manuscript. It is therefore an unwarranted conjecture for Mr. Ludwig to suggest that Mr. Atlas got the story from me, and it is a testimonial to the biographer's conscientiousness that he had dug it up independently. Mr. Ludwig has every right not to be amused by the remark, though it sounds more luridly prophetic in retrospect than when it was lightly uttered. All I can say is that, if the opening had appeared on our lawn and Delmore had called it my grave, I should not have felt disturbed.

Two or three years before the Atlas book, the *Harvard Advocate* planned a memorial issue dedicated to Delmore Schwartz, which got caught up in a change of plans and never came out. I had written a brief reminiscence for it, and Mr. Atlas saw the unpublished manuscript, from which he cited a few details with full acknowledgment. Later I had occasion to publish this sketch in *Canto* (spring 1978) and it will be republished in a forthcoming collection of my essays. Any reader seriously interested in Delmore Schwartz and acquainted with the odds that complicated his existence, I believe, will not find my impression of him unsympathetic.

Sincerely yours,

HARRY LEVIN

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